



Information-rich, but time-poor: exploring Members of Parliament's approaches to information by Chatman's 'small world' conception

Journal:	<i>Journal of Documentation</i>
Manuscript ID	JD-03-2019-0057.R1
Manuscript Type:	Article
Keywords:	information behaviour, information practices, information poverty, elite politicians, Norwegian Parliament, Information research

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts

Information-rich, but time-poor: exploring Members of Parliament's approaches to information in relation to Chatman's 'small world' conception

Abstract

Purpose: This paper analyses how elite politicians in opposition in the Norwegian parliament use information when responding to government propositions, and investigates if Chatman's small world conception can explain the socially and economically highly-privileged groups' approach to information.

Design/methodology/approach: The qualitative analysis of the data consisting of eight interviews with seven MPs and one political advisor is based on a selective coding grounded to Chatman's six propositions on life in the round.

Findings: The overall findings indicate that elite politicians' information practices concentrate in mastering the flow of information and admitting attention selectively, but on broad topics. Whereas MPs' information practices within an intentional approach to be used in political responses and debates aligned with the small world idea, the nebulous approach in keeping updated on societal issues breaks the boundaries of their "small worlds".

Originality/value: The study provides a glimpse into information practises of a little studied group, elite politicians. Moreover, it applies Chatman's conception of small world in a novel manner.

Keywords: information behaviour, information practices, information poverty, Norwegian Parliament, elite politicians

Article Classification: Research paper

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine how Chatman's theories on life in the round, small worlds and information poverty can explain information seeking and the use of a socially, economically and politically resourceful group of decision makers: Members of Parliament (MPs). Chatman's work focused on information seeking and the use of diverse marginalized groups in society, such as retired women, janitors and women prisoners (Chatman, 1990, 1992, 1996, 1999). Her theories are applied also in less impoverished settings, such as university administration (Huotari and Chatman, 2001). We arrived at applying Chatman's work after initial inputs from Taylor's Information Use Environment (IUE) framework (Taylor, 1991), which he explicated by a focus on legislators. Both Chatman and Taylor may be seen as early examples of practice theoretical approaches that, in the past decade or so, have gained attention in information studies, much in line with the more general practice turn in social sciences. They emphasise a view of socially and culturally shared ways of acting in relation to information, where its needs, seeking and use are afforded and constrained by the conventions and values of the community (Byström, Heinström and Ruthven, 2019).

In this article, we will address the ways political elites seek and use information sources in their work as members of the Norwegian parliament. We focus on politicians from the opposition, and how they acquire information in order to respond to government proposals. This focus delimitates onto information practices that serve in abrupt situations, where government sets the agenda, matters span over a topically broad spectrum, and response time is restricted. This means that although the agenda and topics for the most part are beyond the control of the politicians in opposition, they have to react on the proposals put forward by the government.

The Norwegian Government did not have a fixed majority in the Parliament during the investigated election period between 2013 and 2017, and therefore had to seek support for their proposals amongst the six opposing parties. This meant that the opposition had a genuine possibility to negotiate the content in the government proposals, both in the parliament and in the public debate. It seems reasonable to argue that a political situation with a minority government increases the potential importance of information that complements the official documents.

2. Elite politicians' information use environment and life in the round

As more aspects of societies are being subject to legislation, we expect the politicians to have sufficient knowledge in fields they are not educated in and cannot possibly be experts on (Taylor, 1991; Marcella et al., 1999). Despite their lack of formal knowledge, they have to make decisions, and select and judge the quality of information received from the government, from lobbyists, and all potentially interested stakeholders, as well as the endless content of the Internet. For elite politicians “information is not scarce; there is an infinite amount of potentially relevant information available to political actors. It is not so much a matter of whether politicians can be informed but rather how they can avoid information overload” (Walgrave and Dejaeghere, 2017, p. 229). What makes the situation for elite politicians even more complex is that they are held publicly accountable, and they operate in an extremely competitive environment, not only between parties, but often for position and power within their own party (Walgrave and Dejaeghere, 2017).

In politics, information can both uncover problems that may be solved by legislation and inform politicians of the state of things, as well as being used as an argument itself in political debates. Information (including results from research) is a way to legitimise the already preferred solutions, or to argue that a specific problem needs to be investigated more closely before a political decision can be made (Brown, Lentsch and Weingart, 2005). Walgrave and Dejaeghere (2017) claim that there is little research on how elite politicians select information for use. They find that elite politicians in their case, Belgian party leaders and ministers, employ a set of mechanisms to select information for use in their unlimited information environment. This set works in several ways to hinder the information overload becoming overwhelming. The first form of selection mechanisms is composed of procedures, such as organizing templates, routine meetings, specialised staff and confidants. The second type of selection mechanisms consists of heuristics like ideology, specialisation, efficacy and the “*wait and see*”-tactic. Finally, they identify self-confidence as the third way of handling information flows, where the feeling of being well informed and the capability to live with mistakes help the elite politicians to master their information environment. In conclusion, the elite politicians' major strategy is both (1) to filter down the amount of information, and (2) to make it easier to comprehend.

Understanding how elite politicians select information is important per se, since the selected information is “the driver of political attention and, ultimately, policy making (Jones and

1
2
3 Baumgartner 2005)” (Walgrave and Dejaeghere, 2017, p. 242). In an early review of
4 legislators’ information seeking Taylor (1991, p. 239) refers to Frantzich (1982, p. 9) who
5 similarly states that U.S. Congress “translates information on societal needs and desires into
6 public policy by evaluating information on potential options”. Taylor (1991) argues that
7 political decision making particularly does not value conventional objectivity, but is highly
8 value-laden and information dense. A political decision often is “a compromise among
9 competing interests, ideologies, constituencies and personalities” (Taylor, 1991, p. 240).
10 Information required in legislation may be of a *political* kind (e.g., positions of other political
11 actors and own constituencies, own career prospects), *policy* oriented (e.g., actual content,
12 alternatives, and effects on society), *evaluative* (e.g., what works and what does not, and
13 why), or of a *managerial* nature (e.g., procedures and agenda). Taylor (1991) concludes that
14 parliament politicians turn to specialised and trusted party-aligned colleagues to filter
15 information, and that they use personal and committee staff “as primary gatekeepers and
16 analysers of information, which comes from legislative support agencies, executive
17 departments, lobbyists, external sources and constituents” (Taylor, 1991, p. 243). Taylor
18 places politicians in a context where people, settings, problems and their resolutions form an
19 information use environment in which both information access and (political) informational
20 attention is afforded and constrained.
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35

36 Both Taylor (1991) and Walgrave and Dejaeghere (2017) emphasise, some 25 years apart,
37 that elite politicians’ information environment is so broad and voluminous that they need to
38 find ways to condense the actual information to which they grant their attention. This brings
39 us to Chatman’s theory of small worlds. Small worlds provide their members a shared
40 “cultural and intellectual space. That is, those things that hold this world together include a
41 common assessment of information worthy of attention, social norms that allow its members
42 to approach or ignore information, and behaviours that are deemed by other inhabitants to be
43 appropriate for this world” (Huotari and Chatman, 2001, p. 352), much in a similar sense that
44 communities of practice could be described (cf. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015).
45 The small world metaphor emphasises a confined – focused and demarcated – view of the
46 world in the communities where shared “cultural, social, and conceptual frames form a way of
47 life” that differs from the lives lived outside the community (Chatman, 1999, p. 211, with
48 reference to Merton, 1972).
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 Whereas Walgrave and Dejaeghere take an individual politician and her skills and preferences
4 as a starting point to discuss their information selection process, Taylor, and particularly
5 Chatman, emphasise the social, cultural and historical experiences of the group that lead to
6 shared understanding, including values and beliefs, within the small world, and, as a
7 consequence, creates a distinction between insiders and outsiders. Insiders populate the small
8 world within which they view things and appropriate actions with their shared perspective,
9 outsiders are strangers in this world. It is the insiders who define what (information) is worth
10 paying attention to. Outsiders' opinions or advice play a small role, and, moreover, involve
11 the risk that attention might be misdirected. Small worlds may vary to the extent to which
12 they are fixed, but is most genuine as "a community of like-minded individuals who share co-
13 ownership of social reality" (Chatman, 1999, p. 213).
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23

24 Whilst Chatman's theory of a small world is traditionally used to explain the ways
25 information is sought and used by marginalised groups, Taylor's review from 1991, with
26 references to gatekeepers and the recent study by Walgrave and Dejaeghere (2017) with
27 references to filtering mechanisms, give reason to investigate whether Chatman's small world
28 theory can also explain socially and economically highly privileged groups' ways to relate to
29 information. Chatman's work aims to explain the criteria for the targeted attention beyond the
30 information abundance, or, as in our case, information overload. Chatman herself indicated
31 that economic poverty and information poverty are not necessarily linked to each other
32 (Chatman, 1996, p. 194). In a similar vein, it is questionable if the opposite holds true, that is,
33 whether or not economic or social wealth is linked to informational wealth.
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42

43 In her 1999 article on a theory of life in the round, Chatman formulated six statements based
44 on her research on small worlds and information poverty. We have, below, revised them to
45 address information seeking (i.e. accessing information) and use (granting attention) by elite
46 politicians:
47
48

- 49 - Proposition 1: Elite politicians' information use is determined by legitimised others
50 (primarily 'insiders').
51
- 52 - Proposition 2: The appropriateness of elite politicians' information use is a target for
53 public scrutiny (primarily 'insiders').
54
- 55 - Proposition 3: Elite politicians' information use is both outlined by and protective of
56 their political ideology ("worldview" in Chatman's terms).
57
58
59
60

- 1
- 2
- 3 - Proposition 4: Elite politicians' (ideological) worldview "works most of the time with
- 4 enough predictability that, unless a critical problem arises, there is no point in seeking
- 5 information" (Chatman, 1999, p. 214).
- 6
- 7
- 8 - Proposition 5: Elite politicians "will not cross the boundaries of their world to seek
- 9 information" (Chatman, 1999, p. 214).
- 10
- 11 - Proposition 6: Elite politicians "will cross information boundaries only to the extent
- 12 that the following conditions are met: (1) the information is perceived as critical, (2)
- 13 there is a collective expectation that the information is relevant, and (3) a perception
- 14 exists that the life lived in the round is no longer functioning" (Chatman, 1999, p.
- 15 214).
- 16
- 17
- 18
- 19
- 20
- 21

22 For this paper, we have further revised them in relation to information abundance which the
23 political elites meet daily. As a result, the following two research questions are put forth:

- 24 - How do social norms and values enact elite politicians' use of information?
- 25
- 26 - How are information seeking and use intertwined in elite politicians' daily work?
- 27
- 28
- 29

30 Our empirical work is delimited to address these research questions as elite politicians in
31 opposition respond to government's proposals in the Norwegian parliament. We apply a
32 theory that is originally generated to explain the everyday life of marginalised groups, and
33 which implicates a negative effect on both information seeking *per se* and the use of novel
34 information. Chatman (1999, p. 215) states that "[p]eople will not search for information if
35 there is no need to do so. If members of a social world choose to ignore information, it is
36 because their world is working without it". She, herself, was hesitant about whether the theory
37 will be able to explain anything other than everyday casual situations. However, as the
38 information abundance for elite politicians necessitates the limitation of informational
39 attention in order to keep the political system from collapsing, we find it interesting to study
40 whether this environment may be explained using the small world conceptualisation.
41

51 **3. Previous research on elite politicians' information management**

52 Research on parliamentarians demonstrates a work situation where they continually have to
53 familiarise themselves with new aspects of society but where their attitude towards
54 information acquisition is reactive most of the time. Orton et al. (2000) describes politicians'
55 needs for information as "incessant and relentless", unpredictable and always changing.
56 Similar to Taylor (1991), Marcella et al. (1999) describes how a partisan consideration based
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 on the political ideology and beliefs determines what information is valuable in the political
4 arena. This is supported by Watt (2010) who argues that bounded rationality theory is a
5 plausible model for the work of MPs.
6
7
8
9

10 In general, access to information that complements what is provided by the government,
11 enables a parliament with more initiatives (Fløistad, 2001). Marcella et al. (2007) found that
12 politicians alternate between being passive recipients of information and active seekers of
13 information that may not even exist yet. Previous research also suggest that politicians make
14 extensive use of informal and personal sources (Thapisa, 1996; Orton et al., 2000), even
15 though they seemed to be lacking any cognisant mechanisms to evaluate the quality of these
16 sources (Marcella et al., 1999). They often got hold of information by chance, or because
17 others wanted them to have it (Orton et al., 2000). The information offered to legislators is
18 seldom neutral, but – particularly when provided by lobbyists – includes elements of bias
19 (Marcella et al., 1999). Nonetheless, the information provided by lobbyists and NGOs was
20 often found to be highly useful for politicians (Marcella et al., 2007).
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30

31 Walgrave and Dejaeghere (2017) found – relying on the bounded rationality theory (e.g.,
32 Simon, 1985) – that elite politicians tend to outsource their information selection to their
33 advisors, as a form of managing information flows. This possibly makes it easier to get an
34 overview of the information available, which Marcella et al. (2007) had earlier found to be a
35 problem for members of the European Parliament who struggled with forming a clear view of
36 the available information on diverse subjects. This is further complicated by the changing
37 criteria for relevant information during the legislative process. What starts with an open and
38 investigative approach, will often become increasingly more specific as the focus manifests;
39 with the consequence of dismissing anything considered irrelevant or peripheral (cf. Kuhlthau
40 and Tama, 2001).
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50

51 As much as 90 % of the elite politicians in the study of Marcella et al. (2007) estimated
52 themselves to have good or very good information-retrieval skills. However, they appeared
53 easily satisfied, as long as the information met their relatively short-term and, at times,
54 uncritical needs, quickly and effortlessly. Even though digital sources may not be viewed as
55 the most reliable, studies have found them increasingly important (Mostert and Ocholla, 2005;
56 Marcella et al., 2007) and satisfying to the MPs' reactive needs. Hossain et al. (2017)
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 observed similarly that the informants in the Parliament of Bangladesh would sometimes
4 ignore the importance of authentic and reliable information, and instead rewarded quick and
5 easy access.
6
7

8
9 In sum, and with respect to the idea of the small world, previous research highlights
10 experience in information-rich environments as a valuable asset in coping with the volume of
11 information available. The political ideology is a key heuristic in the sorting of what will be
12 emphasized and not, in addition to being a tool for avoiding information overload (Orton et al,
13 2000; Mostert and Ocholla, 2005; Walgrave and Dejaeghere, 2017). Many of the politicians
14 in previous studies had personal assistants and advisors to help them sort out and navigate the
15 available information (Orton et al., 2000; Marcella et al. 1999, 2007).
16
17
18
19
20
21
22

23 **4. Methods**

24
25 Previous research on the information behaviour of parliamentarians has used both quantitative
26 (Thapisa, 1996; Mostert and Ocholla, 2005; Marcella et al., 1999; Hossain et al., 2017) and
27 qualitative methods (Orton et al., 2000; Marcella et al., 2007; Walgrave and Dejaeghere,
28 2017). The previous research all have in common rather low response rates (quantitative data)
29 and a small number of participants (qualitative data), much due to the busy schedules of the
30 target groups. In addition to that, elite politicians, such as Members of Parliament (MP)
31 receive multiple inquiries to participate in research projects, and have to decline many
32 (Engelstad, 2010).
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40

41 A qualitative method with semi-structured interviews was chosen for the present study, to
42 commit to participation, as it was deemed likely that a questionnaire might not be prioritized,
43 but foremost to ensure a rich material. The goal was to encourage the participants to answer
44 openly and share their views on the information related aspects of their work in the
45 parliament. The government at the time of the study consisted of the Conservative Party and
46 the Progress Party. In Parliament, there were six opposing parties, politically positioned on
47 the left and centre of the political scale. Due to the low number of possible informants, we
48 have chosen to keep their party affiliations anonymous.
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56

57 The interviews were planned to take place and later conducted over two months in the spring
58 of 2017, at a point of time when the MPs' four-year election period was coming to an end.
59
60

1
2
3 This ensured that the participants had already gained experience as parliamentarians. To
4 recruit respondents, three of parliament's standing committees were randomly selected. All
5 MPs from the opposition parties were invited to participate, in addition to the political
6 advisors who had more than two years of experience on working with the committees in
7 question. The respondents were contacted by e-mail, with some being followed up by phone.
8 30 potential respondents were contacted and nine of them agreed to participate. Later on, one
9 withdrew due to a busy schedule. In the end, seven MPs and one political advisor were
10 interviewed.
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18

19 The eight participants, six women and two men between the ages of 30 and 65 years, were
20 members of three different opposition parties. Their experience as MPs was between one and
21 three election periods, corresponding to between nearly four and twelve years in parliament.
22 An interview guide, originally designed to fit Taylor's IUE framework, rather than Chatman's
23 work, helped to manage the interviews and ensured consistency in the questions, which was
24 crucial given the limited time available for the interviews considering the busy schedules of
25 the participants. The interview guide consisted of questions on the following themes:
26 characteristics of attending to a new proposal, acquisition of and valuing supplementary
27 information and changes in perceived informational requirements (see the entire interview
28 guide in Appendix). The interviews were carried out in their offices, and lasted between 25
29 minutes and 1 hour and 20 minutes. In total, 8 hours and 11 minutes of recorded interview
30 material was collected.
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42

43 The interview data was first analysed on the basis of identifying terms and phrases in the data
44 that, in one way or another, touched upon informational aspects of the MPs' work in
45 opposition (open coding). These were thereafter clustered to make thematically coherent
46 groupings (axial coding). Results of these two analyses are presented elsewhere (Galtrud,
47 2017). The present work focuses on an additional analysis based on a selective coding
48 grounded to Chatman's six propositions (Chatman, 1999).
49
50
51
52
53
54

55 The citations, transcribed and translated from Norwegian to English by the first author, are
56 kept as close to the original formulations as possible, except for removing formulations of
57 spoken language idioms and those that would risk anonymity of the participants. These
58
59
60

1
2
3 removed or altered formulations are marked with square brackets in the interview excerpts
4 below. When content containing irrelevant passages is removed from the excerpts, it is
5 marked with round brackets. In order to retain anonymity and, due to the low number of
6 potential participants, all information about work or educational background is left out. We
7 consider these precautions not to cause any distortions to the data analysis and findings. The
8 participants are referred to by fictitious androgynous names.
9
10
11
12
13
14
15

16 **5. Results according to Chatman's six proposals**

17 There are multiple examples of utterances that clearly support that elite politicians indeed
18 organise themselves in terms of a small world, i.e., “a community of like-minded individuals
19 who share co-ownership of social reality” (Chatman, 1999, p. 213). We present our findings
20 in relation to the six proposals revised after Chatman (1999).
21
22
23
24
25

26 *Proposition 1: Elite politicians' information use is determined by legitimised others*
27 *(primarily 'insiders')*

28 Despite their relatively short-term appointment of four years, the elite politicians learn to
29 recognise the boundaries of their current “world”, and adjust to the limitations without any
30 formal introductions to work practices. Despite their previous experience as politicians on a
31 local or regional arena, the stepping up in parliament included novel adjustments:
32
33
34
35
36

37 *Well, it was really very overwhelming. (...) At its worst, this is a very lonely place to*
38 *be. (...) It is a great responsibility; you are in charge of an area of politics that you do*
39 *not really know that much about. It is your job to prepare the handling of a case, write*
40 *memos and remarks for the standing committee on behalf of the party. (Echo)*
41
42

43 The participants had different ways to compensate for the lack of (in)formal introduction in
44 their new environment. Golf, for example, turned to the documentation related to previous
45 decisions, and sees this as a way of passing on their knowledge for future parliamentarians:
46
47

48 *We just had to figure things out by ourselves (...) how to work (...) what [the party]*
49 *has said before. Open old documents, recommendations to the parliament... I think*
50 *about that sometimes when I am writing remarks «well, maybe a new member of*
51 *parliament can use this to understand how we voted last election period» when he or*
52 *she is checking up on what I wrote. (Golf)*
53
54
55

56 A new, and sometimes surprising aspect of information use, or in this case, of non-use of
57 political information, was the work in the standing committees. These committees were seen
58 as highly important instances of parliamentary power, when at the same time the political
59
60

1
2
3 debates remained absent in their meetings. The positions are expressed in remarks and
4 recommendations, and when they cast their vote on the motion or bill in question, there are no
5 attempts to convince or persuade one another. For Hotel, this was a major adjustment when
6 becoming a member of parliament:
7
8
9

10 *The meeting was over in five minutes. All we did was to agree on a schedule for*
11 *handling the propositions to parliament and who was supposed to be parliament*
12 *spokesman, and then it was over. When I was first elected, I spent the whole evening*
13 *before my first meeting in the standing committee reading our party program, because*
14 *I thought I was going to be held accountable for every word there. (...) Then I got to*
15 *the meeting and there was no politics whatsoever, just managing the handling of the*
16 *case. (Hotel)*
17
18
19

20 There are two aspects of previous experiences from local and regional decision making that
21 the participants considered valuable in their present positions, the abilities to co-operate and
22 to see practical consequences of decision-making. Both Bravo and Foxtrot talk about this and
23 Foxtrot concludes:
24
25

26 *I would claim that it is a strength of the Norwegian democracy that many members of*
27 *parliament, and the government, have previously been engaged in local and regional*
28 *politics. It gives depth to the decisions, better coherence. (Foxtrot)*
29
30
31

32 The necessity to co-operate and to compromise over party borders is strengthened by the view
33 of work within the standing committees, which takes the form of teamwork. As such, the
34 parliamentarians who represent different parties learn to get to know each other, and to trust
35 each other. Especially when issues containing multiple layers are on the table:
36
37
38

39 *The topic [of legislation] was extensive. It was maybe somewhat problematic since*
40 *only [name of a MP from government party] and I had a complete view. We could*
41 *have fooled the other MPs into anything ... (Bravo)*
42
43

44 The elite politicians do seek and use information in their everyday work. However, after
45 settling into their roles as members of parliament in opposition, much information is gathered
46 through formal consultation responses on bills and motions, and in the structured meetings
47 within the parliament, such as hearings for the standing committees, or party faction meetings.
48 These are a routine way of sharing information.
49
50
51
52
53

54 *Proposition 2: The appropriateness of elite politicians' information use is a target for public*
55 *scrutiny (primarily 'insiders')*
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 As a discussion in connection to Proposition 1 above indicates, the members of parliament
4 seem to create a general fidelity among themselves, particularly in the work with the standing
5 committees. At the same time, they cannot lose sight of their ideological party loyalties.
6
7
8
9

10 The parliamentarians in opposition utilise their meetings with the party group for sharing
11 information. Some of them discuss all matters with their party colleagues, whereas others only
12 bring up matters where they expect some controversies within their party. Although more
13 collaboration among their peers is often desired, the high tempo and number of matters,
14 seldom allow involvement of other than their closest political adviser. Nevertheless, every
15 now and then, colleagues may have useful information:
16
17
18
19

20 *There is a lot of useful history within the party. (...) It may happen that I ask one of the*
21 *more experienced MPs (...) and they might say «oh, you really do not want to act upon*
22 *that, it is just the ministry trying to get a replay, they have been pushing it for 16*
23 *years». (Hotel)*
24
25

26 *We go through, when we have written or gotten remarks, we try to go through them*
27 *[together in the faction], but it is often just by e-mail. (...) There is no time to discuss*
28 *the matter.*
29
30

31 Through the work of the standing committees, there is a lot of contact between members from
32 the different parties, also aside from their usual main allies. Their reputation as acknowledged
33 authorities within their parties is important in deciding whom to contact in order to make
34 progress in a matter.
35
36
37

38 *It can be decisive who is on the committee. One person from [a party] might have a*
39 *completely different view on the issue than another member from the same party. (...)*
40 *It is not always the one who is officially in charge of handling the case that you need*
41 *to talk to (...) You learn along the way which MPs will be able to convince [their*
42 *party]. (Echo)*
43
44
45

46 Similarly, the knowledge of members' ways of acting helps to determine how to move
47 forward:
48

49 *I know [an MP from another party] very well. We have worked together in local*
50 *politics and everything, and s/he is zealous. And s/he has an advisor who takes on*
51 *everything, so we just have to moderate the critique a bit. (Beta)*
52
53

54 *So, it is both about how good they are in the political craftsmanship, and about how*
55 *powerful they are in their own parties. If they are in a position to negotiate on behalf*
56 *of the party, and to make agreements. If they are interested in negotiating at all. Some*
57 *MPs do not really have great ambitions on landing major political agreements.*
58 *(Delta)*
59
60

1
2
3 There is an overall interest to have correct facts in their remarks to the propositions, which is
4 confined not only to other opposition parties but also includes those forming the government:

5
6 *I feel that you can rely on everybody really, that sounds very naïve, but you can to*
7 *some extent trust everybody if you make it clear that you are just making*
8 *clarifications, just checking facts, and that it is not to be used for anything else (...)*
9 *[An MP from a government party] with whom I have cooperated at lot... There are*
10 *several things s/he checked for me, or had someone in government check. (Golf)*
11
12

13
14 Finally, even if MPs are mainly acting upon the boundaries of their immediate setting of
15 parliament, standing committees and their parties in terms of their information use, there is an
16 awareness of a wider public that may exercise public scrutiny:

17
18 *As with the issues being handled in parliament, you have to be careful about how you*
19 *phrase things. (...) You can end up on the front page of VG [one of Norway's largest*
20 *newspapers] over almost nothing. Therefore, being critical of your sources (...) you*
21 *have to verify it somehow. (Charlie)*
22
23
24

25
26
27 *Proposition 3: Elite politicians' information use is both outlined by and protective of their*
28 *political ideology ("worldview" in Chatman's terms)*

29
30 Despite the overall benign information environment of the parliament that is described by the
31 participants, they are aware of their political setting and are willing to boost their parties'
32 views and ideology in the debates and commentaries. This sometimes takes place even if they
33 are, more or less, in agreement about the facts presented, they might question them in order to
34 bring their preferable outcome into discussion.

35
36 *In a way we are working backwards with facts. (...) we look for the information that*
37 *substantiates our conclusion. (Charlie)*
38
39

40
41
42
43 The conviction about what they believe to be the best solution in the end motivates them to
44 seek out information that supports the desired outcome, and, at the same time, they are less
45 enthusiastic about opposing information:

46
47 *In the end, you have to reach a political decision on what you think is best. However,*
48 *you have to, as far as possible, base it on facts. (Hotel)*
49
50

51
52 *We politicians just love research that agrees with us, that we can use as a reliable*
53 *witness. (Echo)*
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 *Proposition 4: Elite politicians' (ideological) worldview "works most of the time with enough*
4 *predictability that, unless a critical problem arises, there is no point in seeking information"*
5 *(Chatman, 1999, p. 214)*
6
7

8 There is a realisation of what is good enough, but it also comes with the price of certain
9 powerlessness, even for an elite politician:

10
11 *I probably spent weeks writing remarks for a while, I kind of thought that it would*
12 *change the world. Then you realise, you have to write what you need to write, and not*
13 *more than that. (Echo)*
14
15

16
17 However, political work has a dialogical characteristic that means politicians may return to
18 the matters on several occasions as the decision-making process evolves:
19

20
21 *It [the information need] often changes when the case is sent to the ministry, because*
22 *when we get a letter of reply, a need for new argumentation and facts arise.*
23 *(Echo)*
24
25

26
27 *Proposition 5: Elite politicians "will not cross the boundaries of their world to seek*
28 *information" (Chatman, 1999, p. 214)*
29

30 There are many actors trying to get the elite politicians' ear. The participants are, however,
31 rather wary of using information offered to them, especially outside the established networks.
32 Lobbyists and PR agencies have their own agenda, but still gain attention as long as they
33 belong to the established actors. Information provided through less established ones, are met
34 with more scepticism. Echo reflects upon this:
35
36
37

38
39 *I am very careful with referring to organisations that use a lot of heartfelt examples*
40 *and individual cases. You never know the whole truth about an individual case (...) I*
41 *prefer talking to organisations that work on a more principal and overarching level.*
42 *(Echo)*
43
44
45

46 Whereas positive past experiences pave the way for information from external sources to be
47 used, some actors enjoy uncontested authority, for instance *Statistics Norway*. Another highly
48 authoritative source of information is the *Parliaments' Section for Research Services* that
49 investigates different matters confidentially, as requested by MPs or their political advisers.
50 Sources on the Internet, such as Wikipedia, are used to gather initial orientation in new
51 matters but are not used explicitly in discussions. What is important for the elite politicians is
52 that they have good grounds when they participate in debates or comment on something, and
53 for the most part, they rely – by choice or due to lack of alternatives – on their own capacity
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 to get hold of such material. When getting help from their political advisers, they expect a
4 digested report, rather than just pieces of information.

5
6 *I think you can find almost anything by yourself if you just search for it. Of course, to*
7 *put it together so it makes sense ... (Golf)*
8
9

10 Although mass media provide information that keeps the elite politicians updated on current
11 matters of interest in society, they prefer to use original sources in cases where they
12 themselves make use of the information initially reported in the media.
13

14
15 *If it refers to research... it is better to find and read it myself. If I am going to refer to*
16 *it, I want it from the main source; I do not want what VG has written about it. (Echo)*
17
18

19 Similarly, diverse social media are used for scanning purposes or for instant messaging by the
20 participants, but rarely for finding information to be used in matters regarding decision-
21 making. Social media have been adopted as a channel for contact with constituents, and the
22 participants get both inputs and questions from the public through them.
23

24
25 *The inbox on Facebook and everywhere ... it is harder to keep an overview of that*
26 *than of my e-mail. (Echo)*
27
28

29
30 *Twitter can be used to get a quick response on something, or to get an idea of what*
31 *different people think. They can reach out to you and ask «have you read this report?»*
32 *(...) Facebook is really more of a distribution channel, we answer questions, but the*
33 *main purpose is to spread information. The Messenger App is used quite a lot as an*
34 *alternative to e-mail and text messages. To keep in touch with people from different*
35 *NGOs (...) It is quick and you are in front of the computer anyway. (Delta)*
36
37

38
39 Even more old-fashion methods are used to connect with the public and their concerns or
40 interests, even if these are not used as information sources for any particular matter *per se*:
41

42
43 *They might stand there in the corner with a megaphone (...) every now and then I stop*
44 *and listen for a while. (Hotel)*
45
46

47 All participants make regular use of lobbyists, PR consultants, media and publicly-available
48 search engines on the Internet, but they each serve different purposes. While lobbyists and PR
49 consultants can update the MPs on a current affair, the media and search engines are used in
50 final rechecks to ensure that no new development is omitted before a debate or casting a vote.
51 Using a search engine can also help with a quick overview of a case and create context in a
52 matter that is unfamiliar to the politician, or help them to check what the other parties have
53 said on the matter.
54

55
56 *If I am going to use it [facts or information], I think I would have googled it first to*
57 *see if someone else said the same thing. And have a closer look into the organisation*
58
59
60

1
2
3 *that provided the information, if I was a bit sceptical. (...) However, if you find that*
4 *several others confirm it, I guess that is the best way to see if it is trustworthy. (...)*
5 *That might not be good enough, though... (Golf)*
6
7

8 *Proposition 6: Elite politicians “will cross information boundaries only to the extent that the*
9 *following conditions are met: (1) the information is perceived as critical, (2) there is a*
10 *collective expectation that the information is relevant, and (3) a perception exists that the life*
11 *lived in the round is no longer functioning” (Chatman, 1999, p. 214)*
12
13
14

15
16
17 The material did not reveal any instances of this kind of a “break down” concerning the elite
18 politicians’ agenda or their working conditions. Instead, there was a sense of a stable and
19 ordered state of affairs. The following statement reinforces this impression:
20

21
22 *It is not as if you are in a meeting about something and think, «who is researching this*
23 *topic, what can I find?» No, I do not do that ... (Golf)*
24
25

26 27 **6. Discussion and Conclusions**

28
29 In this paper, we have analysed the interview material from eight informants from the
30 opposition in the Norwegian parliament to find out how they relate to their information
31 abundance when responding to government propositions. The analysis gives a glimpse into
32 the MPs’ views and practices related to information but it does not provide any causal or
33 generalisable findings. However, it is worth noting that the statements made during the
34 interviews are largely consistent with previous research on the subject. Through the analysis,
35 we addressed two research questions: how do social norms and values enact their use of
36 information; and, how are information seeking and use intertwined in their work? The
37 research questions were roughly framed by Chatman’s six propositions about *life in the round*
38 (Chatman, 1999). Our overall conclusion is that the theory of life in the round has relevance
39 in explaining the elite politicians’ information seeking and use.
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48

49 The many and diverse, as well as often unexpected matters requiring the elite politicians’
50 response with short timeframes, places high demands on the politicians’ capacity and
51 strategies to handle information (cf. Taylor, 1991; Orton et al., 2000; Walgrave and
52 Dejaeghere, 2017). We found that balancing between ideological manifestations and practical
53 collaboration is a shared understanding, which enables everyday work in parliament for our
54 participants. This seems to be connected to the concept of insiders, where politicians view the
55 parliament as one social reality and the party as another, with enough similarities that their
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 worldview and (information) practices hold for both circles of insiders. Our findings indicate
4 that politicians develop two kinds of information management approaches. The first,
5 intentional approach concerns the information that they put into actual formal use by deciding
6 their goal and/or by referring to it in their responses (cf. Brown, Lentsch and Weingart, 2005).
7
8 The second, nebulous approach could be described as an opportunistic form of environmental
9 scanning (cf. Choo and Auster, 1993) or sustained awareness of things and trends in society at
10 large. The two appear related in the sense that sustained awareness provides a latent
11 foundation for being able to react quickly when the formal use of information is required.
12
13
14
15
16
17
18

19 It is the intentional approach that readily aligns to Chatman's propositions. The elite
20 politicians' information use (i.e. granting attention) is apprehended by legitimised others, such
21 as their political peers and advisers, as well as the other members of the parliament
22 (proposition 1; cf. Taylor, 1991; Orton et al., 2000; Walgrave and Dejaeghere, 2017; Marcella
23 et al., 1999, 2007); the appropriateness of their information use is a target for public scrutiny
24 by their peers but also by their supporters through the media (proposition 2); and, their
25 information use is both outlined by and protective of their political ideology as supporting and
26 contradicting information is emphasised/avoided according to the political goal aimed
27 towards (proposition 3; cf. Orton et al, 2000; Mostert and Ocholla, 2005, Walgrave and
28 Dejaeghere, 2017). The remaining three propositions are neither supported nor disregarded.
29 In our material, we did not find any statements of intentional information seeking (i.e.
30 accessing information) that would have contradicted the elite politicians' ideological
31 worldview (proposition 4), they did not seem to "cross the boundaries of their world to seek
32 information" (Chatman, 1999, p. 214; proposition 5). In our material, there were no occasions
33 that would have fulfilled the criteria for crossing boundaries in the proposition 6, e.g., "(1) the
34 information is perceived as critical, (2) there is a collective expectation that the information is
35 relevant, and (3) a perception exists that the life lived in the round is no longer functioning"
36 (Chatman, 1999, p. 214).
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50

51 However, when it comes to the nebulous information approach, the elite politicians were
52 much more open-minded and opportunistic in their information management strategies. Their
53 statements reveal that they paid attention to several kinds of information sources, within mass
54 media and social media, as well as individuals and organisations on the broad spectrum of
55 issues, political stances and (in)formality (cf. Thapisa, 1996, Orton et al., 2000; Marcella et
56 al., 1999, 2007). The nebulous approach appears almost to be a contra-theory for the life in
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 the round: The elite politicians' information use, i.e. granting attention, is not restricted by the
4 legitimised others (contra-proposition 1); the appropriateness of their information attention is,
5 to a large extent, not a target for public scrutiny (contra-proposition 2); their information
6 attention traversed their political ideology (contra-proposition 3); although their (ideological)
7 worldview worked most of the time, they – without any particular urgency – were granting
8 attention to diverse information (contra-proposition 4) in several, familiar and unfamiliar
9 settings (contra-proposition 5); thus, crossing boundaries was a common condition (contra-
10 proposition 6).
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18

19 In conclusion, the elite politicians in our study were able to move in and out of their
20 immediate context as members of the parliament. This makes them different from the
21 marginalised groups studied by Chatman. Chatman's findings indicate that the members of
22 marginalised groups are, or experience themselves to be, more constrained, whereas the elite
23 politicians in our study seized certain latitude in their actions. Walgrave and Dejaeghere
24 (2017) identify self-confidence (i.e. the feeling of being well informed and the capability to
25 live with mistakes) as the final asset to master an infinite information environment. It may be
26 that this same self-confidence also makes the leeway possible. However, this leeway was
27 mainly related to the information for sustaining awareness, whereas the intentional, more
28 visible, use of information for decision-making and argumentation aligns itself to the same
29 type of restrictions outlined by Chatman's propositions for life in the round.
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38

39 Finally, the analysis here builds on a small data, originally not designed around Chatman's
40 theory. Whereas the results and conclusions are in line with previous research, they remain
41 tentative. Both the intentional approach, building on the revised propositions and the nebulous
42 approach with a basis on the contra-propositions, instigates several new research openings.
43 For instance, our material did not allow us to fully highlight the kinds of situations where the
44 participants utilised one or both of the approaches, or the exact boundaries between the two –
45 these relationships would be fruitful to probe into in further studies. Outside the level of elite
46 politicians, how do the findings hold true for other political decision-making, from local to
47 regional governmental bodies, or in non-governmental organisations? Although our material
48 did not include any indication resulting from differences due to party membership, it could be
49 of interest to study whether this holds in a broader study. Moreover, it seems that the political
50 elites' information practices have remained quite unchanged over decades (cf. Taylor, 1991),
51 whereas the information available has increased beyond comprehension. This accentuates the
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 need for both more detailed qualitative or quantitative studies to better understand needs for
4 changing practices and support for top-level decision making. Furthermore, the political
5 situation *per se* deserves deeper consideration in future studies. Whereas the Norwegian
6 political situation was relatively stable at the time of data collection, the British elite
7 politicians in the House of Commons during Brexit negotiations since the referendum in 2016
8 clearly work in a more disordered political arena. Similarly, Norway's solid base in open
9 democracy is likely a condition that differs from many other countries where the leadership is,
10 or is moving, into a more autocratic direction. In our opinion, revisiting Chatman's theory has
11 much to offer in such studies.
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21

22 References

23
24 Brown, M. B., Lentsch, J., & Weingart, P. (2005). "Representation, expertise, and the German
25 parliament: a comparison of three advisory institutions". In: Maasen, S. and Weingart, P.
26 (Eds.), *Democratization of expertise? Exploring novel forms of scientific advice in political*
27 *decision-making: Vol. 24. Sociology of the Sciences* (s. 81–100). Dordrecht, Netherlands:
28 Springer.

29
30 Byström, K., Heinström J. & Ruthven, I. (2019). "Workplace Information Environment –
31 challenges and opportunities for research". In Byström, K., Heinström J. & Ruthven, I. (Eds)
32 *Information at Work: Information management in the workplace*. London, UK: Facet, pp.
33 147-172.
34
35

36 Chatman, E. A. (1990). "Alienation theory: Application of a conceptual framework to a study
37 of information among janitors". *RQ*, 355-368.
38

39 Chatman, E.A. (1992). *The Information world of retired women*. Westport,
40 CT: Greenwood Press.
41
42

43 Chatman, E. A. (1996). "The impoverished life-world of outsiders". *Journal of the American*
44 *Society for Information Science*, 47, 193–206.
45

46 Chatman, E. A. (1999). "A theory of life in the round". *Journal of the American Society for*
47 *Information Science*, 50, 207–217.
48
49

50 Choo, C. W. and Auster, E. (1993). "Environmental scanning: acquisition and use of
51 information by managers". In: *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*, edited
52 by M. E. Williams. Medford, NJ: Learned Information, Inc. For the American Society for
53 Information Science.
54
55

56 Engelstad, F. (2010) "Rom med utsikt: om å studere samfunnets toppsjikt." In: Widerberg, K.,
57 Hansen, M. N., & Album, D. (2010). *Metodene våre: eksempler fra samfunnsvitenskapelig*
58 *forskning*. Universitetsforlaget, Oslo. pp. 173-188.
59
60

1
2
3 Fløistad, B. (2001) "Establishing a Research Service in the Norwegian Parliament: Why the
4 Right Time Was Now", paper presented at Libraries and Librarians: Making a Difference in
5 the Knowledge Age, 16. - 25. of August 2001, Boston, available at:
6 <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED459747.pdf> (accessed September 15th, 2019).
7

8
9 Frantzich, S. E. (1982). *Computers in Congress: The politics of information*: Beverly Hills,
10 CA: Sage Publications.
11

12 Galtrud, Åse Garten (2017). *Opplyst uenighet. En studie av informasjonsatferd hos*
13 *opposisjonspolitikere på Stortinget* [Master thesis]. Oslo University College.
14

15 Hossain, U., Hossain, A. & Islam, S. (2017). "An assessment of the information needs and
16 information-seeking behaviour of Members of Parliament (MPs) in Bangladesh. *Information*
17 *and Learning Science*, 118(1/2), 48-66.
18

19
20 Huotari, M. L., & Chatman, E. (2001). *Using everyday life information seeking to explain*
21 *organizational behavior*. *Library & Information Science Research*, 23(4), 351-366.
22

23
24 Jones, Bryan, and Frank Baumgartner. 2005. *The Politics of Attention: How Government*
25 *Prioritizes Attention*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
26

27 Kuhlthau, C. C., & Tama, S. L. (2001). *Information search process of lawyers: a call for 'just*
28 *for me' information services*. *Journal of documentation*, 57(1), 25-43.
29

30 Marcella, R., Carcary and, I., & Baxter, G. (1999). "The information needs of United
31 Kingdom Members of the European Parliament (MEPs)". *Library management*, 20 (3), 168-
32 178.
33

34
35 Marcella, R., Baxter, G., Davies, S., & Toornstra, D. (2007). "The information needs and
36 information-seeking behaviour of the users of the European Parliamentary Documentation
37 Centre: A customer knowledge study". *Journal of Documentation*, 63(6), 920-934
38

39
40 Merton, R. K. (1972). *Insiders and outsiders: A chapter in the sociology of knowledge*.
41 *American Journal of Sociology*, 78, 9-47.
42

43 Mostert, B. J., & Ocholla, D. N. (2005). "Information needs and information seeking behavior
44 of parliamentarians in South Africa". *South African Journal of Libraries and Information*
45 *Science*, 71(2).
46

47
48 Orton, R., Marcella, R., Baxter, G. (2000). "An observational study of the information
49 seeking behaviour of Members of Parliament in the United Kingdom", *Aslib Proceedings*,
50 Vol. 52 Iss 6 pp. 207-217.
51

52
53 Simon, H. (1985). *Human Nature in Politics: The Dialogue of Psychology with Political*
54 *Science*. *American Political Science Review* 79 (2): 293-304.
55

56 Taylor, R.S. (1991). "Information use environments". In: Dervin, B & Voigt, M. J. (Red.),
57 *Progress in Communication Sciences 10* (s. 217-255). Norwood, NJ : Ablex.
58
59
60

1
2
3 Thapisa, A. (1996). "Legislative Information Needs of Indigenous Parliamentarians in
4 Botswana and Impact on Effective Decision Making". *International Information and Library*
5 *Review*, 28(3), 203-232.
6

7
8 Walgrave, S., & Dejaeghere, Y. (2017). "Surviving information overload: how elite
9 politicians select information". *Governance*, 30(2), 229-244.
10

11
12 Watt, I. (2010). "Members Use of Information and Changing Visions of the Parliamentary
13 Library". *Library Trends*, 58(4), 434-458.
14

15
16 Wenger-Trayner, E. & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015). Learning in landscapes of practice: a
17 framework. In Wenger-Trayner, E., Fenton-O'Creevy, M., Hutchinson, S., Kubiak, C., &
18 Wenger-Trayner, B. (Eds.) *Learning in landscapes of practice: boundaries, identity, and*
19 *knowledgeability in practice-based learning*. Routledge.
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60