

## Unit 2: The Relationship Between Parliament and the Media

### Learning Objectives

#### Why parliament and the media need each other

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- Detail the contribution both parliament and the media make to democratic governance;
- Understand what constitutes a strong professional relationship between parliament and the media;
- Point to constructive ways that parliament can build trust, and, in turn, foster a good working relationship, by assisting the media in the performance of their function;
- Identify when the parliament or the media have become either too adversarial or too close to each other, thereby jeopardizing the relationship.

### **Introduction and Overview**

Why is it important for parliament and the media to work well together? What might happen if they don't or if they work too closely together? The purpose of this module is to highlight the importance of a good working relationship between parliamentarians and journalists. The key to these parties fulfilling their duties to their respective constituencies is to build a strong professional relationship based on mutual respect and recognition –both are essential actors in a working democracy. If the relationship between them is either adversarial or too close, parliament and the media run the risk of undermining the public's 'right to know' and hampering the development of an informed society.

## Why Media is Good for Governance

The media is one of the most important actors involved in helping the public enjoy its 'right to know.' Along with parliament, the media shares a responsibility to contribute to political, economic and social development in ways consistent with democratic principles by pursuing fact-based, fully substantiated reporting. Ultimately, economic development is best achieved and sustained in societies that are democratic and well informed.

### Box 2: Organizations Protecting Freedom of the Press

Article 19  
Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility  
Committee to Protect Journalists  
Freedom House  
Human Rights Watch  
Index on Censorship  
Inter-American Press Association  
Intl. Fed. of Liberty Assns and Institutions  
International Federation of Journalists  
International PEN  
International Press Institute  
Journalistes en Danger  
Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance  
The Media Institute  
Reporters without Borders  
World Association of Newspapers.

Parliament should do all it can to protect a free and independent media, as the presence of the media is vital for a functioning democracy and good governance. For this reason parliament should work to establish a culture, if necessary through legislation, which protects the media. Parliament should facilitate the media's operation by ensuring freedom of expression, the right to information and freedom of the press. Parliamentarians should participate in debates regarding how to

achieve a balance between freedom of speech and standards of responsibility, decency and quality, but if there is any uncertainty as to whether a limitation on these freedoms are necessary, parliament should opt in favor of greater freedom for the media, since without media there is a greater division of power between elected officials and their constituents.

## A Strong Professional Relationship

A good working relationship between parliamentarians and journalists is essential if both are to fulfill their duties. The key is to build a strong professional relationship between both groups that is based on mutual respect and recognition that both are essential

actors in a working democracy. Parliament and parliamentarians, as representatives of the people, possess ultimate legitimacy. However, it is the media that assists the community in deciding whether to support a candidate in the first place and whether to renew their representative's mandate at the following election. The media assists the community with their decision about whether to give their continued support to parliamentarians by providing the public with information about the actions and opinions of parliamentarians.

The community does not benefit from an adversarial relationship between parliamentarians and the press gallery. If the parliamentarians and the press are antagonistic towards each other parliamentarians may be less willing to disclose relevant information, and journalists' reports on parliament may be tainted. Both these outcomes do not help the free flow of accurate information. However, parliamentarians need to recognize that one of the purposes of the media in a democracy is to keep parliament accountable and should not confuse reporting tainted by an adversarial relationship with the media providing alternate opinions on issues that are sometimes critical of parliament and parliamentarians. On the flip side, parliamentarians and the press should not become *too* close either. When this occurs, journalists may become less willing to be critical of government, thereby undermining the important contribution they make to democratic governance and the flow of information.

One way in which parliament can build a strong professional relationship with the media is by involving the media, and through them the public, in policy deliberations. Likewise, parliament should assist society in participating in its deliberations by opening up the decision-making process and enabling the media to report on its business. The media also provides a conduit through which public opinion is communicated to members of parliament. This creates a two-way flow of information. Parliamentarians should recognize this as valuable. Fair and accurate reporting is a channel for public feedback that assists them to legislate and scrutinize government performance. Therefore, political leaders must not seek to stifle the airing of opposition views and should, rather, pay attention to diverse opinions as expressed through the media.

In addition, both the parliament and media should do all they can to inform citizens about parliamentary activities and the role of parliament so as to help empower the public. It is essential that parliament build a strong professional relationship with the media so that both parliament and the media do all they can to inform citizens about parliamentary activities; this is beneficial to both the parliament and the community.

### **Building a Relationship Based on Respect**

If parliamentarians want to overcome any mistrust that may exist between the community and their elected representatives, the first step is to build trust between parliamentarians and those who convey their actions and opinions to the public. Both sides have a responsibility to overcome any mistrust that might exist. Parliament and the media should respect the other's role in serving the community so that people in turn respect both the media and parliament as providers of accurate information and informed opinion.

The press gallery must also realize that trying to trick politicians in order to get news stories makes parliamentarians suspicious; meanwhile, parliamentarians must accept that criticism and a degree of cynicism are part of the media's duty to the public. A strong professional relationship also requires the media to provide balanced coverage of public policy debates without trivializing or denigrating the parliamentary and governmental decision-making processes. Journalists need to understand the issues crucial to all segments of the population and play their part in informing the public about the challenges facing society.

In recognition of the important role the media plays in a democracy and facilitating community involvement in debates relating to the business of parliament, it is traditional for parliaments to provide media with access to the institution and to parliamentary processes, and to report on them. In order to facilitate this, parliament, grants certain facilities to the press gallery to assist them perform their function. Furthermore, parliament should encourage investment in all forms of independent media and the

media, where appropriate, should pool their often-limited resources instead of their journalists in order to improve the coverage of parliament and other institutions. Parliamentarians, journalists and the public should have access to a variety of print, broadcast and Internet-based media to end reliance on government information or party-run information sources, which do not have the independence required to fulfill the media's accountability function.

### Unit 2 Questions

Please answer each of the following questions. If you are taking this course in a group you may then meet to discuss your answers.

1. Despite the presence of bias in some media reporting, the media nevertheless plays a pivotal role in a working democracy. What role do the media play in democratic governance?
2. What is it to have a strong professional relationship between parliament and the media?
3. Drawing on the commentary and readings, what can parliament do and refrain from doing to help build the environment and trust needed to strengthen the relationship?
4. Why should parliament seek to avoid building a relationship with the media that is adversarial or too close?

### Select Bibliography

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## Internet Resources

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[http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/rights/articles/eav011404\\_pr.shtml](http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/rights/articles/eav011404_pr.shtml)

