

Unit 3: Constraints and Obstacles to Building a Professional Relationship

Learning Objectives Keeping it professional

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- Identify some of the constraints and obstacles that could hinder the development of a strong working relationship between parliament and the media;
- Outline strategies to overcome these obstacles.

Introduction and Overview

The purpose of this module is to examine what factors impact on the ability of either the media or parliamentarians to build a strong professional working relationship. Only by being aware of the constraints and obstacles to the relationship can parliament and the media seek to overcome them and forge the kind of professional working relationship necessary for an informed society.

Commentary

It is clear that a strong professional relationship between parliament and the media is essential if both parties are to fulfill their respective duties to their constituencies, in particular facilitating the public's ability to enjoy their 'right to know.' However, parliament and the media need to overcome certain obstacles if they are to build the strong professional relationship needed to achieve an informed society.

Improving Professional Behavior

In many countries the media have sought to keep their audiences by reducing their political coverage in order to cover less serious stories, for example gossip or witchcraft. When parliamentary reporting is downgraded, inadequately trained journalists and commentators are often assigned to cover parliamentary stories. Media agencies may also seek to pool parliamentary reporters, whereby more than one publication uses the same journalist to cover the same or different stories, to reduce the cost of covering parliament. It is the same 'overhead' cost of having a journalist on the ground, but shared between two or more publications. This arrangement is preferable where the publications are targeting different markets – for instance, regional/ provincial papers that would normally not have the resources to have a journalist in parliament to cover national parliamentary business could pool resources with papers from another province in order to have a correspondent cover parliament. Papers competing in the same market, such as two distinct national publications would not normally enter into such an arrangement because they are competing with one another and a pooled journalist is not good for news diversity.

The assignment of poorly trained journalists and pooling reporters is a concern for parliament, as parliamentary reporting requires specialized knowledge and the presence of reporters and commentators who are willing and able to build a strong professional relationship with parliamentarians. Parliamentarians also worry that pooling reporters can unfairly promote or destroy parliamentarians' careers; the smaller the parliamentary press gallery the greater the impact the biases or opinions of one reporter will have on the career of an individual parliamentarian.

Another constraint to building a professional relationship between the media and parliament is the concern by parliamentarians that factual reporting may be fused with opinion in a way that does not make it clear to the community where one aspect of reporting stops and the other starts. Parliamentarians are often concerned that journalists' opinions could be interpreted as factual reporting by the community. Meanwhile, the media often claim that the need to include opinion and comment into

factual reporting is due to a lack of factual material being made available to the media by parliamentarians. Just as it is important for newsmakers to clearly differentiate columns of news with opinion pieces, it is also vitally important for parliament to provide the media with the materials with which to report.

These concerns undermine the trust needed to build a strong working relationship. Ultimately though, these obstacles cannot be overcome through legislation; rather the relationship between the parties has to be based on trust that grows out of dealing with each other in a fair and responsible manner. Periodic abuses by individual parliamentarians and journalists of their freedoms and of their special positions in society, for instance by reporting spurious rumors about parliamentarians private lives, must not be used as reasons to curb the ability of the entire media or parliament to legitimately perform their roles. The freedoms accorded to parliamentarians and the media reflect the supremacy of the ultimate right of the public to be informed.

There are, however, a number of initiatives outlined in the **Cape Town Principles**, which parliament and the media can implement to overcome some of these concerns and improve the professional standards of parliamentarians and the media. These include:

- Ensuring media organizations retain more experienced reporters and assign those reporters to cover parliament;
- Encouraging journalists to report on public policy issues that are relevant to everyone and not just the economic elite;
- Providing journalists and parliamentarians with greater access to professional development programs to prepare them to participate more effectively in the democratic process;

- Delivering orientation courses for parliamentarians and journalists on parliamentary practices and procedures and providing adequate research support for parliamentarians;
- Ensuring that governments promote education systems that encourage the development of citizens who can understand and assess for themselves the policy issues debated in parliament and in the media;
- Parliamentarians conducting debates in a respectful and well-informed manner; and
- Establishing media's self-regulatory codes of professional conduct that commit them to pursuing fact-based, fully substantiated reporting and reinforcing the media's responsibility to inform the electorate of the conduct and performance of the representatives they have elected.

Independent Media

Another constraint on building a strong professional relationship between parliament and the media occurs when there is not an independent media. A strong professional relationship is dependent on, among other things, a media that has the independence to report objectively and, when called for, to criticize the actions of parliamentarians.

In many countries there are concerns that the media consists solely of state-owned broadcasters and publications. Similarly, in some countries there is a growing trend of media, newspapers in particular, which are operated by political parties and politicians. These developments are concerning as they undermine the independence of these media agencies, in particular the freedom of these agencies to report freely without fear of punishment or reprisal.

When media agencies are owned by governments, politicians, or political parties there should always be strong guarantees of editorial independence. Furthermore, parliament and parliamentarians should do what they can to encourage a diverse and independent media so that in the event that certain media agencies do not enjoy editorial independence there are other sources of information to which the community can turn.

Box 3:				
Press Freedoms by country				
<u>Not Free</u>				
Algeria	Chad	Iran	Qatar	Tunisia
Angola	China	Iraq	Russia	Turkmenistan
Azerbaijan	Congo (Kinshasa)	Kazakhstan	Rwanda	United Arab Emirates
Azerbaijan	Cote d'Ivoire	Laos	Saudi Arabia	Uzbekistan
Belarus	Cuba	Libya	Somalia	Vietnam
Bhutan	Egypt	Maldives	Sudan	Zimbabwe
Brunei	Equatorial Guinea	Nepal	Swaziland	
Burma	Eritrea	North Korea	Syria	
Cambodia	Guinea	Oman	Tajikistan	
Cameroon	Haiti	Pakistan	Togo	
<u>Partly Free</u>				
Afghanistan	Congo (Brazzaville)	Honduras	Moldova	Solomon Islands
Albania	Djibouti	Jordan	Morocco	Sri Lanka
Armenia	East Timor	Kenya	Mozambique	Tanzania
Bahrain	Ecuador	Kuwait	Nicaragua	Thailand
Bangladesh	Ethiopia	Kyrgyzstan	Niger	Tonga
Bolivia	Fiji	Lebanon	Nigeria	Turkey
Bosnia-Herzegovina	Gabon	Liberia	Papua New Guinea	Uganda
Burkina Faso	Gambia	Macedonia	Paraguay	Venezuela
Burundi	Georgia	Madagascar	Philippines	Yemen
Central African Republic	Guatemala	Malawi	Seychelles	Zambia
Colombia	Guinea-Bissau	Malaysia	Sierra Leone	
Comoros	Guyana	Mauritania	Singapore	
<u>Free</u>				
Andorra	Cyprus	Israel	Namibia	South Africa
Antigua & Barbuda	Czech Republic	Italy	Nauru	South Korea
Argentina	Denmark	Jamaica	Netherlands	Spain
Australia	Dominica	Japan	New Zealand	St. Kitts & Nevis
Austria	Dominican Republic	Kiribati	Norway	St. Lucia
Bahamas	El Salvador	Latvia	Palau	St. Vincent & Grenadines
Barbados	Estonia	Lesotho	Panama	Suriname
Belgium	Finland	Liechtenstein	Peru	Sweden
Belize	France	Lithuania	Poland	Switzerland
Benin	Germany	Luxembourg	Portugal	Taiwan
Botswana	Ghana	Mali	Romania	Trinidad & Tobago
Brazil	Greece	Malta	Samoa	Tuvalu
Bulgaria	Grenada	Marshall Islands	San Marino	Ukraine
Canada	Hungary	Mauritius	Sao Tome & Prin	United Kingdom
Cape Verde	Iceland	Mexico	Senegal	United States of America
Chile	India	Micronesia	Serbia & Monten	Uruguay
Costa Rica	Indonesia	Monaco	Slovakia	Vanuatu
Croatia	Ireland	Mongolia	Slovenia	

Parliamentary efforts to ensure media independence help build trust between parliament and the media. A truly independent media is essential for the community to enjoy their 'right to know.'

Self Regulation

The *Recommendations for an Informed Media* affirm that ultimately it is the responsibility of the media, not parliament, to set and supervise the media's highest professional and ethical standards. If there is to be regulation of the media it should be left to independent bodies that are:

- Possibly government funded, but which operate totally independently from the donor in the same way as the courts or electoral commissions are independent from government;
- Composed of strong and independently minded people of integrity and sensitivity who are committed to the duty of the media to inform the public accurately and responsibly; and
- Appointed through an independent and transparent process, which ensures that those selected are free of associations that might interfere with their ability to adjudicate fairly and impartially.

Furthermore, government or parliament should not seek to use its financial power, access to infrastructure or import and distribution restrictions on resources that the media need in order to influence the media. Finally, parliament should do all it can to repeal or reject any attempts to require the media to be registered or to acquire a license in order to operate, since that is against the nature of free-speech principles and requires greater government regulations and involvement in media coverage.

Unit 3 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. What are the main obstacles parliamentarians and the media face when seeking to build a strong professional relationship?
2. List ways in which parliament is able to encourage the independence of the media, including state-run media?
3. Outline what a media council is and the role they can play in maintaining standards and independence in the absence of legislative restrictions?
4. What methods does your country have to provide a solid parliament and media relationship and thus a well-informed society?

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