

Unit 4: Making Parliament Newsworthy

Introduction and Overview

Have you ever read a news headline about government and decided it was not nearly interesting enough to warrant the time needed to complete the story? The purpose of this module is to examine how, having already established a good working relationship between parliament and the media, it is possible to make the parliamentary process and parliamentary business more newsworthy. Only if parliamentary business and the parliamentary process are newsworthy will the media be in a position to provide the extent of coverage parliament deserves.

What is Newsworthy in Parliament?

No matter how strong the working relationship between parliament and the media is it will not lead to a noticeable increase in the flow of information unless there is something newsworthy for the media to report. An event or issue becomes newsworthy when it is something that the community needs to know, should know or would be interested in learning. The newsworthiness of almost any piece of information is always debatable and is dependent on what each individual thinks is important for the community to know. It has traditionally been up to the media to determine what is newsworthy. Further, the press should always be free to choose about what they report. This is the definition of an independent media. Parliaments should seek to protect and encourage the press' freedom to select which issues to cover.

Citizens have a right to know about the workings of parliament and the media should be committed to assisting citizens to enjoy their 'right to know' by providing coverage of parliament. However, the media are limited in what they are able to cover by what is newsworthy. In an attempt to make parliamentary business more newsworthy,

parliament should provide the media with as much accurate and timely parliamentary information as possible along with ready access to parliament so that the media can determine for themselves what is newsworthy and, in turn, let the community know.

It is important for parliament to ensure that the parliamentary process is also part of any news coverage so as to help build respect in the community for parliament as a democratic institution. Parliamentarians can make the parliamentary process *more* newsworthy by addressing issues in parliament, and making sure ministerial announcements, whenever possible, are first made in parliament rather than directly to the media.

Parliamentary Access for Journalists

Representative of the media, as citizens, are entitled to reasonable access to parliament. However, the media are in a special position in that they are also representatives of all those citizens who are unable to attend parliament, but who wish to be informed about what occurs in parliament. Accordingly, the media act as citizens' eyes and ears to parliament. Taking into account the special representative role the media plays, parliament should provide the media with special access privileges not necessarily afforded to everyday citizens. Parliament can do this by providing special accreditation and access to journalists covering parliamentary business.

There are some practical limitations in providing special accreditation to journalists reporting on parliament, for instance the actual size of the press gallery and some administrative constraints. This means that there will normally need to be a selection process to determine which journalists are to be accredited. Parliaments should not use logistical constraints to limit the number of journalists accredited to the parliamentary press gallery, and exclude certain journalists or media agencies. For this reason, parliament may prefer to delegate the responsibility for accreditation to a press body such as a media council. Whichever system is implemented, the guidelines should reflect the right of the media to have access to parliament and its proceedings, and should not

be unreasonably restrictive. In addition, journalists should always remember that parliament is a sovereign institution and that its right of access does not justify poor behavior or activity that breaches parliamentary privilege.

Opening Committees

The business of parliament is not only undertaken on the floor of parliament, but also in parliamentary committees. In order to advance a more participatory democracy, parliament should open all its processes to media coverage, including the work of parliamentary committees. Parliament should provide schedules of committee meetings to the media, and journalists should seek to provide coverage of this important parliamentary process. Media coverage of committees will better involve the public in parliamentary decision-making and prevent collusion in cases where committees are investigating wrongdoings.

When committees are not open to the public or the media, parliament must be prepared to deal with situations where journalists report on information that is leaked from people attending closed committee deliberations. The reporting of the information from closed committee deliberations may constitute contempt of parliament. However, parliaments should only take disciplinary action against journalists if what has been reported is false or incorrect.

Broadcasting Parliament

Building an informed society and encouraging an exchange of ideas is essential for good governance and development. Part of building an informed society includes informing the public about parliamentary proceedings; broadcasting parliament can convey more fully the substance and flavor of how parliament works. Broadcasting parliament can take many different forms, whether it is a simultaneous broadcast or edited footage that can be used by the media to report on parliamentary business. Whichever way, a picture tells a thousand words and will assist the media in providing coverage of newsworthy issues and legislation on which parliament is deliberating.

Facilitating the Flow of Information

In light of the importance of the free flow of information, it is helpful for parliament to employ staff to assist parliamentarians in providing information to the media. To the extent that resources allow, parliament should have a press office and public affairs officers to assist them in carrying out this important function. Such an office and staff should be non-partisan and should represent the parliament as a whole, rather than a specific party.

Unit 4 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 is newsworthiness and who should determine what is newsworthy?
2. How can parliament increase coverage by helping make the parliamentary process and parliamentary business more newsworthy?
3. What are the pros and cons of broadcasting parliament?

Select Bibliography

Cook, Robin. "A Modern Parliament in a Modern Democracy" *Political-Quarterly* 2003 (1-3); 74:1; pp.76-82