

Introduction

Over recent years there has been a growing acceptance that the general public has a right to participate in the free flow of information and to know about what is going on in their community, particularly the workings of government and parliament. As such there has been an expanding call for governance to become more open and transparent. Another incentive for increasing the flow of information within communities has been the realization that an informed society and open and accountable democratic institutions are essential for growth, development and poverty alleviation. Furthermore, governance that is responsive to the needs of all citizens is central to parliamentarians having their mandates renewed by the community.

One of the best ways to achieve transparency and facilitate the flow of information between parliament and the community is via the media; accordingly parliaments need to consider how they can forge a strong professional relationship with the media in order to build an informed society. However, the relationship between the media and parliament is complex and often strained by a lack of media independence, perceived bias or the failure of the press gallery and editors to demarcate between reporting and commentary.

Despite the, often rocky, relationship that exists between these two parties, parliamentarians are slowly accepting that a free and independent media is an essential component of a functioning democracy and necessary for an informed society. An information rich society provides parliamentarians with the feedback they require in order to respond to the needs of citizens, whilst ensuring they pursue a course of action that has taken into account all the negative consequences. In addition to building a strong relationship with the media, parliaments can also champion transparency by making parliament more open, implementing regimes that facilitate public access to information and developing a regulatory environment conducive to a free and independent media.

Audience

This course is intended for parliamentarians, parliamentary advisors and staff, and the media. Participants will gain a better understanding of the relationship between the media and parliament and how that relationship can be strengthened so that both parliament and the media can reach their full potential and meet their responsibilities to their respective constituents.

Aim of the Course

The aim of this course is to introduce participants to the concept of the community's 'right to know', and explain why this is important for transparency, development and poverty alleviation to build an informed society. Furthermore, this course aims to highlight the media's role in facilitating an informed society and the importance to parliament of nurturing a fair and independent media and building a strong professional relationship with the parliamentary press gallery.

Course Content

The course will cover the following six units:

1. Introduction to the 'Right to Know'

Unit One introduces participants to the notion that citizens have a 'right to know' about the workings of their parliament. Furthermore, the reasons why it is vital to good governance and equitable development for there to be an informed society will be outlined.

2. The Relationship between Parliament and the Media

Unit Two highlights the importance of building a good working relationship between parliament and the media. The key to fulfilling their duties to their respective constituencies is to build a strong professional relationship between the parties that is based on mutual respect and recognition that both are essential actors in a working democracy.

3. Constraints and Obstacles to Building a Professional Relationship

Unit Three examines what factors impact the media's or parliamentarians' ability to build a working relationship with each other. It suggests methods for overcoming these constraints and obstacles in order to build a strong professional relationship.

4. Making Parliament Newsworthy

Unit Four examines 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 in order to encourage greater coverage of parliament in the news media.

5. Providing the Legal Framework

Unit Five examines the legal framework that is best suited to developing a free and independent media capable of helping citizens enjoy their 'right to know' and assisting parliament to build an informed society that can provide them with feedback on decisions they have to make.

6. General Principles of Access to Information

Unit Six introduces participants to the notion of access to information the themes canvassed in different pieces of access to information legislation around the world. In addition, this unit outlines initiatives that parliament can undertake in order to become more open and transparent.

Expected Outcomes

It is expected that on completion of the six units participants will:

1. Understand the concept of the community's 'right to know' and the importance of the free flow of information and an informed society for development and poverty alleviation;
2. Appreciate that it is in the interest of parliament to build an informed society so that parliament's decisions are more responsive, better informed and have broader community support;
3. Acknowledge that despite the often rocky relationship, it is vital for parliament to work towards building a strong professional relationship with the parliamentary press gallery as the media is a vital ally in ensuring the free flow of information between parliament and the community and, thus, building an informed society; and
4. Recognize that parliament should work to overcome constraints to its relationship with the media, whilst providing an environment conducive to the creation of a fair, accurate and independent media.

Background Reading

- *Cape Town Principles for an Informed Democracy*
(Parliament and the Media: Securing an Effective Relationship 14-18 April 2002, Cape Town, South Africa)
- *Parliament and the Media: Building an Effective Relationship*
(15-18 February 2000, New Delhi, India)

- Bouchet, Nicolas and Kariithi, Nixon *Parliament and the Media: Building an Informed Society*. World Bank Institute Working Paper; Washington DC, 2003

