



Inter-Parliamentary Union

For democracy. For everyone.

Chemin du Pommier 5
Case postale 330
1218 Le Grand-Saconnex
Geneva – Switzerland
www.ipu.org

The Parliamentary Media Forum 2014

Opening remarks by
Martin Chungong
Secretary General, IPU

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Honourable Speaker of the Federal National Council,
Ladies and gentlemen

It is with great pleasure that I address the 2014 Parliamentary Media Forum.

One year ago, I was here when the Federal National Council held its first ever and I would add, highly successful Parliamentary Media Forum. It paved the way for parliaments in the region to begin engaging the media in a more concerted and comprehensive manner.

Today marks another step forward. We all know the importance of media. We court it daily because it is still by far the most important conduit to communicate with our constituents en masse. With so many different types of media to use, the strength and efficiency of that communication is a fundamental pillar of any democratic society.

This Forum is special because it focuses on a very defined, specialized part of the media - the parliamentary media. Its daily objective and story is you, the parliament. Its role is to report back to the people on what you do, what you say and what that means for every single citizen in the country.

Without the media, transparency and accountability of parliament would be at a standstill. We all know the power of the media in shaping public opinions, reaction to political developments and issues that go to the very heart of our existence today.

We also know that too often, the media focus is on party politics. On the individual political personalities - the leaders, the government - and on political differences. The meat of what parliaments and parliamentarians do is too often absent from the news editor's story rundown for the day.

Take France and the UK as an example. In the past three years, coverage of parliament on national television channels has accounted for between 16 and 25 per cent of political news. The rest has been the government.

This is common to political news reporting everywhere. It is also then true that the voice of the political majority is the one that is most frequently seen and heard in the media.

Yet, democracy feeds off diversity.

If there is no diversity of opinion or content in what the media report, then of course, there is an end result. The public have a negative image and a one-sided perspective of politics that we know is alienating them.

Analyses from many parts of the world show that media reporting on parliament, particularly during election times, focuses heavily on the political horse race. Yet the public want to make their electoral decisions based on issues.

By and large, people aren't aware of the many initiatives parliaments and their representatives are taking to inform and engage the public – whether it is on the institution itself, or the legislative decisions that are being taken.

Public disillusionment and disengagement from politics is a very real problem in our world today. It underpins the growing public apathy towards politics and the falling figures for voter turnout.

Mr. Speaker,
Ladies and gentlemen

How do we turn this around? How do we make sure that not only are the public more widely and deeply informed but also re-engaged and active in political decision-making?

This is where you the parliamentary journalists come in. A strong, knowledgeable and responsible parliamentary media corps that spotlights the substance of parliament's work, one that is better able to communicate its impact and relevance to ordinary, everyday life, is priceless.

Why do I say that? Because if media coverage is less driven by personalities and political conflicts, if it is more issue-focused, with an emphasis on quality of information and takes an engaging and constructive approach, the message **will** get out.

The public will better understand parliament, its work, and how it affects them. They are more likely to engage in informed decision-making outside of the ballot box. We know this because it is clear that people do want to have a say in making decisions on issues that directly concern them. Many are just finding different ways other than the ballot box to express their views.

A parliamentary media corps that reflects political diversity and which does the job it is meant to do makes sure that the political contract between citizen and State is upheld. Government of the people, by the people, for the people.

Some media have begun to realize the impact of traditional political coverage and are taking action. The news programme for Danish national TV has adopted what its news editor calls "constructive journalism". No political fist-fights. Less focus on personalities. More reporting on issues that matter to the people. The result is a win-win situation for the public, the broadcaster and the politician.

The public is better informed of their concerns.

The politician is made to deliver on substance and so enhances his or her public image and standing.

The broadcaster now has the most popular news programme in the country.

Honourable Mr. Speaker, let me be clear. The responsibility to communicate effectively does not fall only to the parliamentary media. It is in partnership with parliament and parliamentarians.

Navigating the modern 24-hour media landscape is not an easy task. How to deliver the perfect 20-second sound bite without losing content? What is the difference between a good radio and a good television interview? Should you be on twitter? Instagram? Or Facebook? If so, what should you be saying in 140 characters? And what about YouTube or a parliamentary channel for those constituents who want to see if their MP is attending debates and how they are performing...The list goes on.

There are so many ways to communicate now that it can be quite daunting. But exciting too for it offers opportunities that simply weren't there even 15 years ago. You can now reach different target audiences using different media tools.

The British Parliament for example, created a series of animated films on parliament and how it works to reach out to citizens and school children. It posted them on YouTube - and then tweeted about them. It's a great outreach resource.

Ladies and gentlemen, I've spoken about the media and about parliament, but let me also say a few words about the Inter-Parliamentary Union. What can we do to help strengthen the engagement between media and parliament?

As with all our work to support parliaments, we are ready to provide tailored assistance in this area. In the past year alone, we have worked with the Nigerian and Seychelles parliaments on providing practical training to meet their specific media and communications requirements. We have training tools such as IPU's *Social Media Guidelines* for parliaments, which have proved to be popular and useful for our members.

There is of course the access to the vast range of parliamentary expertise across the world through our Members and within the Secretariat itself. And the e-Parliament Conference organized every two years for our Members is a not-to-be-missed event that marries IT with communications in a bid to better engage and inform the public.

You have an interesting day ahead of you, so let me conclude by wishing you hearty and successful deliberations on this truly important subject.

Thank you.