

Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments

Warsaw, 19 – 21 April 2012

The parliament, public opinion and the media

Introduction

by Mr. André Flahaut,
Speaker of the House of Representatives
of Belgium

A. *Status Quaestionis*

Nobody can deny that the media have a crucial role to play in the workings of parliamentary democracy. Their influence on a parliament that is in direct touch with public opinion and on a government anxious to explain and to obtain the population's support and participation is entirely elementary and normal. Political life must indeed remain open to critical scrutiny. A free press in an open economy at the service of society is the best guarantee of a free parliament where each member's freedom of speech remains the golden rule. However, any government, both in its management of its daily business and in its definition of future policy, is the first to have an obligation to account to Parliament. Parliamentary control over governmental action indeed constitutes an essential cog of democracy. Parliament is well and truly the first legitimate body of democratic debate. It is the MPs, and they alone, who are entrusted with the task of legislating and controlling the government's policies.

It is in this context that consideration should be given to the various ways in which the Parliaments can inform and dialogue with the public and to the role which the media can play.

It must regrettably be noted that the financial and economic crisis, creating difficulties for a fair number of European citizens, has, as a corollary, a lack of citizens' confidence in the effectiveness of political action and in the members' capacity to solve their various problems (employment, and so on).

The relationship between the parliamentary world and the public should therefore be improved.

Communication passes virtually exclusively via the media, but not exclusively via journalists!

Thought should be given to a direct channel between the public and parliament, but it should be known that each MP has already created his or her own website via which his or her electorate or people in general can interact.

The current media are being overwhelmed by the generalisation of the Internet, mobile phones and the social networks. Now, users generate the content and the information themselves (on-line forums) and are no longer content to make do with the information that a journalist or an "expert" imparts to them. This is never free from populism, but the Parliaments would be wrong to disparage or to ignore this trend. A simple Internet user can therefore become influential and it is no longer only the media that generate and interpret the news.

The citizen is more than a simple spectator and the journalist is therefore no longer the sole analyst of the parliamentary news. The Information Technologies can contribute to reconciling society with democracy by giving the public direct access to information. These means however have their limits because nothing could replace the personal contacts on the ground of the elected politicians for the purpose of explaining and clarifying the public authorities' actions.

The first objective is to explain the parliamentary work to the public, in a clearly understandable manner, and to clarify the political issues, jargons and tactics. Sight should not be lost of the fact that the government initiatives to which the media, in direct touch with the news, give a broad “immediacy is news” echo - are often perceived by public opinion and by the media themselves as decisions ready for implementation. The parliamentary work that has to follow is too often erased, which gives, wrongly, the impression of a certain failure to act.

The participative nature of the Web could benefit the parliamentary activity and vice versa.

Television, radio and the press are no longer able to create opinion on their own. Public opinion is no longer satisfied with one-way communication in which only the voices of politicians and journalists would be heard.

This communication process, which needs to be developed, must therefore be regarded as a blossoming of citizenship. It must also be designed to make young people more aware, to give them an interest in the political arena.

75% of the population are active on the social networks. The latter can therefore no longer be ignored in the communication between parliament and public opinion, both for making the parliamentary information more accessible to the public and for transmitting society’s signals to the parliamentary system. It is furthermore on Parliament that it falls to transpose society’s aspirations (via the “representatives of the people”) into concrete policies.

B. Developments and Concrete Implementation Proposals

Several Parliaments are planning to take or have already taken various initiatives on the subject.

1/ Creation of Tools on the Internet, Television and Radio, and in the Written Press

- The creation of an interactive forum on the Parliaments’ websites themselves, as already exists on the websites of the principal daily newspapers (on-line press).
- A “Parliamentary News” programme on plenary session issues, major questions, or the passage of a bill. When an MP introduces a bill, he or she has an intention that ought to be illustrated by an accessible text, or even by a mini-report in which the MP can defend his or her project.
- A “Parliamentary Week” programme to summarise the work, on the radio: an open platform: an MP has 3 -5 minutes to defend an issue.

- Communication quickly becomes useless, even harmful, if the public is not heeded. A telephone roster organized by the MP him or herself can be a direct means of communication that is accessible to all (on certain days and within certain time slots), including to those who are not avid Internet users. This would obviously require both means and time.
- Popular consultation, via forums on the Internet, is a form of direct democracy. “Informal” popular consultation via a television programme on the great current events (Citizen Initiative) is conceivable.
- Press: introduction of a parliamentary supplement, in order to deal with plenary session issues and major cases (public financing, professional implementation, etc).
- “Governmental” communications: the Parliamentary Speakers would express themselves on TV and radio three to four times a year in order to report on parliamentary issues.

2/.Maximising the Transmission of Information

- A website with web-TV and associated dossiers (with an e-line for the 27 Parliaments).
- Use of the new media for rapid dissemination of information (Twitter, Facebook or others). Henceforth, the individual can produce his or her information and broadcast it, most frequently via the Internet or mobile communication. The recent events in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain or Morocco show the importance of these new modes of transmission, which should not be neglected. The new media therefore unquestionably have a mobilising function. But they should not be over-estimated either. To assume that parliamentary activity should be simplified, that its agenda should be adapted to that of the media, or to “twitter” all Committee-related activity. If the National Parliaments have to adapt to the media, and the policies to the various means of broadcasting, it would above all be in order to have control over and to make use of them, and to be capable of capturing the information that concerns them, and the cover that is made of their activity on those platforms.
- A parliamentary database for the 27 Member States of the EU (pooled information on the means of communication used by the various Parliaments).
- Parliamentary immersion weeks for editorial journalists, with the collaboration of the political groups.
- A newsletter (see European Parliament)

3/ Change at the Parliamentary Level

- A formatting of the plenary sessions, following the example of the European Parliament and other Parliaments: i.e. a strict and rigorous limitation of the speaking time.
Advantages: the vivacity of the debate. For the speakers: concision, focus on the essential, better knowledge of the subject.
- An interruption system, following the example of “*Tweede Kamer*” (Holland). Advantage: increase of the Speaker’s role in the conduct of the debates.

4/ Possible Paths at the European Level

- A study of the various forms of media coverage of the Parliaments in their national areas, and in Europe as a whole, that would enable not only a report on the importance of each medium to be established, but also of each support, could be envisaged.
- The creation of a European Parliaments' Media Agency for the creation of a "European Media Area" could be considered. That would reinforce the symbolic aspect while co-ordinating, in a spirit of subsidiarity, the common policies and messages that are addressed to the populations of the 27 Member States.

C. *Questions for Stimulating the Debate*

Faced with these developments relating to the role of the media, certain questions have to be asked. Their objective is also to launch the debate on the subject.

- Concerning the audio-visual media:
Do the Parliaments and the political leaders necessarily have to follow and adapt to the advances and demands of those media (need for brief official statements, formatting), then running the risk of diluting the richness of the parliamentary debate?

The risk exists of seeing the real parliamentary debate being relocated from Parliament and taking place in the media.

- Concerning the social media:
 - Information generated by the public:

Can the social media generate "reliable" information for the benefit of the public? Indeed, the social media are characterised by the fact that their users build "information" and twitter between themselves (In this respect, Mr. **Manuel Castells**¹ speaks of "individual mass media").

¹ A Spanish sociologist (who passed his doctorate in France), and a recognised Information Society specialist. His trilogy devoted to "The Information Era", in three volumes, particularly emphasises the transformation of society via the development of networks. Mr. Castells has been Professor of Sociology and Town Planning at the University of Berkeley in California since 1979.

In addition to the chance that they give to the public to take part in the public debate and to form a political opinion, these media also risk clouding and deforming the information. In other words, this technological development creates a kind of “meta-information”.

- Transmission of information to MPs:

The question arises of whether or not the social media (in particular the Internet, forums, and chat sessions) can provide relevant information in terms of the political decision process.

A political vision consists of elements that are not reduced solely to the sum of numerous individual opinions. It is the fruit of deliberations and dialogues between social groups rather than between individuals.

Moreover, “digital democracy” also poses a problem of representativeness.

The fundamental question also arises of determining the extent to which the social media can bring assistance to MPs regarding the processing and the assimilation of the massive information flow.

- Although the development of the social media has led to the abolition of information monopolies, the question should nevertheless be asked about the extent to which these new media - also driven by commercial principles – might culminate, almost insidiously, in unidimensional communication.