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Parliament's Relationship with the Media

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Introduction

Modern democratic parliaments are institutions that seek to have the public informed about their work. Governance processes which are transparent to their citizens, and support an accessible and open parliament, are highly desirable. In focussing on this relationship, between parliaments and citizens, it seems inevitable that parliaments find themselves engaging more with the media. Typically, parliaments engage with the media to create a more direct link between parliament and their respective constituencies and communities. Parliaments' aims are to inform citizens about the work of parliaments in the hope of encouraging greater understanding of the parliamentary institution and engagement with the community.

Clearly, from a parliamentary standpoint, media coverage of parliamentary proceedings can make a positive contribution to achieving greater transparency and openness and linking directly with citizens. From a media standpoint, media organisations are independent institutions that typically practice editorial control over the content of their output. They are informed by their own desires for stories that will sell. Such an aim does not necessarily accord with the interests of parliaments. The challenge for parliaments is in managing this complex relationship between the media and parliament.

For most parliaments, print media journalists and still photographers have long been part of the parliamentary environment. As radio and television broadcasting emerged and developed, parliaments responded, some more cautiously than others, by allowing access for broadcasts of part or all of formal parliamentary proceedings. Some parliaments have established their own radio or television stations to transmit directly to the public. More

commonly parliaments have entered formal or informal partnerships with public or other broadcasters.

As new technologies have emerged, parliaments seek to use them effectively by integrating available technologies into parliamentary processes. In the past ten years, new media outlets have emerged notably using the internet and the digital environment. These modalities have the promise of allowing citizens on a far greater scale than in the past opportunities to see in an unedited form what is going on inside parliament.

Parliaments are confronted with many challenges in engaging with the media, not least of all the fundamental issue of, who decides what is reported on or shown. There are competing priorities in this regard. The media has an insatiable appetite for information which sells well and is typically, instantaneous, sensational and ephemeral. Members tend to see media opportunities politically, according to party and other more subjective interests. The parliament will be targetting opportunities to present a positive image of proceedings and the institution, to help overcome public apathy, disenchantment, dissatisfaction or ignorance. For a parliament, traditional viewing ratings have little relevance; community outreach is a far more important concept.

The relationship between parliament and the media can be understood in terms of striking a balance of interests, and to be effective this requires a framework. It is important for parliament to have a strategic policy which defines its relationship with the media, and to have rules and guidelines which not only give effect to that policy but at the same time support and nurture a professional working relationship.

This paper provides an outline of the relationship between the Parliament of Australia and the media that work there.

Parliament of Australia's recognition of the role of the media

Hansard transcripts and radio broadcasts are important and useful means of disseminating knowledge about parliamentary proceedings. However, they have a relatively small audience. Most people in the Australian community rely on media reports for information about parliamentary proceedings, and indeed about government policies and activities. Because of the extent of this reliance on the media the standing of Australia's parliamentary democracy is dependent upon fair and accurate media reporting. The Parliament of Australia has long acknowledged the importance of the role of the media in

the reporting of its proceedings. The Parliament's recognition of this important role of the media is reflected in the generous and longstanding access arrangements for the media in Parliament House.

Originally, the historical accident of a shortage of suitable office accommodation in Canberra in 1927, when the provisional Parliament House was first occupied, led to the allocation of accommodation for the representatives of media organisations within Parliament House. This situation has been accepted by the Parliament, and when the new building was occupied in 1988 a corner of the second floor was set aside for media personnel who regularly report on parliamentary proceedings. The media's continued tenancy in Parliament House is accepted despite the fact that much of the work of these persons and organisations does not relate directly to the proceedings of the Parliament. It is well established that some newspaper and television organisations do not maintain offices in Canberra other than those they occupy in Parliament House and their staff operate from Parliament House on a full time basis for the reporting of Canberra and district news, parliamentary or otherwise.

The parliamentary environment is characterised by the fact that the Prime Minister, cabinet and all other Ministers, in addition to backbench Senators and Members, work principally from their Parliament House offices when in Canberra. It is a matter of considerable convenience to both groups that they are collocated in the one building. The opportunities for informal interaction, in addition to formal meetings are considerably extended by this circumstance.

The present arrangements are that media personnel are provided with office space and access to facilities in Parliament House at large, and special viewing galleries are set aside in each of the chambers from which authorised members of the media can observe parliamentary proceedings. In addition, each chamber is equipped with facilities for radio (since 1946) and television (since 1988) broadcasting.

Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery

The Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery at the Australian Parliament is comprised of representatives of the main media organisations in Australia, both electronic and print, as well as freelance journalists and camera operators. Currently, some 300 media personnel have tenancy in the dedicated location in Parliament House set aside for media covering the Parliament, comprising offices and studios. Other persons with Press Gallery

membership, who do not have office space, come and go, accessing the building regularly. Other dedicated media work spaces, as referred above, are provided in the form of one of the four galleries in each of the Senate and House of Representatives Chambers (the gallery behind the President's and Speaker's chairs, respectively) which are held for the exclusive use of members of the Press Gallery.

Included in the membership of the Press Gallery are representatives from the five national free to air television networks and also pay television network, Sky Television Australia. The two major commercial radio networks, with stations in all capital cities, Southern Cross Broadcasting network and Macquarie network, also are represented. The major newspapers are represented, including those of News Ltd—the flagship broadsheet *The Australian* and all of the tabloids from the capital cities—and Fairfax—*The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian Financial Review*. The Australian Consolidated Press has representation for its magazine, *The Bulletin*. In addition, local and overseas news wire services, Australian Associated Press, Associated Press of America, Reuters, Bloomberg and Dow Jones, all have space in the building. Online publishers are agitating to gain tenancy, and Crikey, the Australian based 'news and gossip' online publication has an office as well.¹

It has long been the practice that the Press Gallery forms a committee of its members in order to manage their affairs within Parliament House. The Press Gallery Committee is a committee of volunteers which has an important role in liaising with the Parliament on administrative matters in relation to accommodation and in relation to the rules applying to media access. Members of the Press Gallery elect from their number a President and Vice President to represent their interests, and it is with the President of the Press Gallery that the Presiding Officers communicate formally in relation to the Press Gallery's relations with the Parliament. It is expected that the President, the Vice President and the four general committee members, will take a leadership role in guiding the individual members of the Press Gallery in maintaining acceptable standards of behaviour while working in Parliament House.

The Parliament issues media personnel with a parliamentary security pass, when they receive accreditation to join the Press Gallery. It is a peer review

¹ Some of the information in these paragraphs derives from a panel discussion in which Ms Karen Middleton, journalist and President of the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery, took part at the 2007 Commonwealth Serjeants-at-Arms Professional Development Conference, 2 August 2007.

accreditation system. The Press Gallery Committee receives applications from people who apply to join the Press Gallery and it decides, on the basis of certain criteria, whether or not the applicants are deserving of accreditation. The Committee makes the recommendation and the Parliament accepts it.

While members of the Press Gallery are colleagues, in the sense of sharing the same profession and general address within Parliament House, and organise together to a limited extent, it would be a mistake to identify them as forming a cohesive and uniform group. Rather, the working environment is a competitive one and each individual works largely independently of fellow journalists and media personnel and forges her or his own connections.

Framework for media working at Parliament

By tradition, and supported more recently by legislation, the Presiding Officers are responsible for control and management within the parliamentary precincts.² Approval for media access within Parliament House rests finally with either or both Presiding Officers. To a large extent, parliamentary relations with the media are dependent upon goodwill and respect, for the authority of the Presiding Officers and for the dignity of the two Houses and the parliamentary institution. Apart from these fundamentals, legislation, the standing orders and guidelines and rules set by the Presiding Officers and resolutions of parliamentary committees and the Houses themselves, provide the framework for acceptable behaviour by the media working at the Parliament of Australia.

In relation to filming and photography, the President has established rules to govern access to the Senate wing including the Senate Chamber, the Speaker has established rules to govern access to the House of Representatives wing including the House of Representatives Chamber and the Presiding Officers together have agreed rules to govern access to the joint areas of Parliament House. In order to streamline arrangements, the Presiding Officers jointly have established *Guidelines for Filming and Photography in Parliament House*.³ Except for the chambers, the guidelines apply uniformly and give preferential treatment to media who are members of the Press Gallery. In relation to the chambers different rules apply in each one, reflecting the separate development of media access policy in each House independently of one another.

² *Parliamentary Precincts Act 1988*, s. 6.

³ http://www.aph.gov.au/visitors/film_guidelines.htm

The Usher of the Black Rod and the Serjeant-at-Arms are charged with the responsibility of administering the guidelines and other rules in their respective chambers and other areas in the building. The fundamental principle established by the guidelines is that Senators and Members, and other persons, are not to be filmed or photographed without their knowledge or in circumstances where they have not agreed to be photographed. Also important is the aim of preventing them, in what is essentially their workplace, from being harassed by visitors and the media seeking to interview, film or photograph them without having been forewarned. At the same time, the Presiding Officers have sought to achieve a balance of interests with the media who desire liberal access to Senators, Members and parliamentary proceedings for their work. On occasions either or both Presiding Officers have sought the views of party leaders before making a decision on a specific request from the media, as they attempt to ensure that no photograph or film should be made to the disadvantage of any political group or Member of Parliament.⁴

A more restrictive regime which existed previously in relation to photography and filming has been relaxed by the Presiding Officers, with a view to encouraging better public understanding of Parliament's functions and activities through properly administered guidelines for media access.

The guidelines provide the Press Gallery with quite liberal access to Senators and Members and to proceedings. While Press Gallery photographers and television camera crews may take photographs or film at any time on invitation in committee rooms, private rooms or function areas, the taking of photographs or film elsewhere in the building is prohibited except with the express approval of one or both Presiding Officers, as relevant. They do not usually grant permission for such activity in the private access areas and corridors of Parliament House. However, in considering requests, the Presiding Officers have regard to whether the filming is planned to occur on a sitting day, the purpose of the filming and the likelihood of disturbance to Senators, Members and other building occupants. Requests to film in public areas are usually approved, provided it is considered building occupants and visitors will not be disturbed or inconvenienced.

Radio journalists may similarly make recordings on invitation in private rooms but recording elsewhere in the building is prohibited except with the express approval of the Presiding Officers. The Presiding Officers have approved the practice for television and radio 'door stop' interviews to occur

⁴ Harris I C ed, *House of Representatives Practice*, 5th edn, Department of the House of Representatives, Canberra, 2005, pp. 122-123.

outside the non-public entrances to Parliament House, or in the garden courtyards adjacent to the chambers.

The behaviour by members of the Press Gallery is generally of a high professional standard in relation to the media rules, whether working in the chambers or elsewhere in the building. Nevertheless, incidents do occur which indicate that individuals try to test the limits of acceptable behaviour and to find a way around rules they find inconvenient or obstructive. When behaviour has fallen seriously short of the standard expected, it has usually been on occasions in one of the chambers. The typical kind of misbehaviour has been in relation to taking and publishing photographs which do not meet the relevant Presiding Officer's guidelines. In such circumstances it is common for the Presiding Officer to impose the sanction of withdrawing the offending photographer's access to the chamber for a specified period of sittings.

Broadcasts of parliamentary proceedings

The backdrop to the work of the Press Gallery and parliamentary relations with the media is the focus of attention on the two chambers and the fact that broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings is well established and expanding. The Senate and House of Representatives Chambers and some committee rooms are equipped with comprehensive sound systems and robotic cameras which enable proceedings to be broadcast live and also recorded. Parliamentary staff operate this equipment. The Presiding Officers have agreed guidelines for camera operators in relation to proceedings in the Houses, and each House has adopted rules which apply to the broadcasting of that House's proceedings.

Since 1946, pursuant to legislation, Australia's national radio broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), in cooperation with the Parliament has provided live radio broadcasts of parliamentary proceedings on a daily basis.⁵ A dedicated parliamentary committee was established to regulate the radio broadcast and rebroadcast of parliamentary proceedings.⁶ Prior to this, most people only had access to the Parliament via newspaper reports. The ABC NewsRadio currently attracts a national audience of some 750,000 listeners each week.⁷

⁵ *Parliamentary Proceedings Broadcasting Act 1946*

⁶ Joint Committee on the Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings, for further details see <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jcbpp/index.htm>

⁷ For further details see <http://www.abc.net.au/newsradio> .

Since 1988, live proceedings have been broadcast on the House Monitoring Service to occupants throughout Parliament House, including to the Press Gallery. In 1990, limited direct television transmission commenced in the Senate Chamber and the following year on 12 February 1991, televising of proceedings from both the Senate and House of Representatives Chambers became a routine occurrence. From this time the ABC TV has shown one hour of question time live from one chamber and rebroadcast one hour of question time from the other chamber later in the evening.

Although the Parliament does not have its own television channel, since 1999, it has provided a live web-cast of parliamentary proceedings through the parliamentary website.⁸ The web-casts are watched by 350,000–400,000 viewers outside Parliament House each year.

Also, the ‘feeds’ of live proceedings produced by the Parliament are available, subject to rules about usage, to the use of Senators, Members, media organisations and members of the public upon request. In relation to media organisations their access is typically governed by general or specific agreements with the Parliament. The media networks are able to use excerpts from the House Monitoring Service for fair reporting of proceedings, in accordance with guidelines set by the two Houses. In terms of what film images are aired, each television and radio network is able to make its own decision about what, if any, parliamentary material to use. These decisions are not required to be revealed to the Parliament, and it is presumed they are based on programming considerations. Typically, the networks use audio visual excerpts on their news and current affairs programs. The overriding principles for use of the broadcast and recorded material is that they are to be used only for the purposes of fair and accurate reports of proceedings, and not for political party advertising or election campaigns, satire or ridicule, or commercial sponsorship or advertising.

As a consequence of the particular focus of parliamentary telecasts on question time, the print media have successfully argued for access by still photographers during question time. The Presiding Officers accepted the proposal that the access of television networks to televised images gave them a relative advantage over the print media for images. Currently up to five still photographers from the Press Gallery, whether employed by the major newspaper groups or freelance, are permitted to access the northern and southern galleries in the chambers to take photographs of proceedings. As referred above, the guidelines are different in each chamber.

⁸ For access see <http://www.aph.gov.au> .

These days parliamentary proceedings are more extensively televised. Since 2000, the Parliament has had formal agreements with two cable networks to provide them with feeds of all proceedings, which they can transmit on dedicated parliamentary television channels. One network TransAct, has three channels on which it shows proceedings of the Senate, the House of Representatives and parliamentary committees. The other network, Sky, has a dedicated channel, *Sky Parliament*, on which it can chose to show parliamentary audio visual material at any time, but usually does so only during parliamentary sittings.

The newest media development for the Parliament has been that since June 2006, the ABC has provided MP3 downloads, or podcasts, of Question Times from each chamber, and their popularity appears to be growing. The possibility of vodcasting is now being considered.

Directed outreach through the media

Since 1998, the House of Representatives has had a dedicated media liaison office which actively promotes the work of the House and its committees, having the express aim of enhancing community understanding of and interaction with the House and the Parliament. Specialist media advisers are employed by the House and several measures target the media to help achieve this outcome.⁹ These measures include *House News*, an online news site receiving well over 100,000 visits per annum, and an email alert service which provides regular updates to some 1000 media outlets (and a total of 2,400 subscribers).¹⁰ Media advertisements, fortnightly in *The Australian* and monthly in *The Bulletin*, promote parliamentary activities and events. In addition, *About the House*, a bimonthly magazine, is produced with a distribution of some 19,000 copies per issue, including to the media, and complementing the magazine is *About the House*, a 30 minute television program, produced by the Parliament and airing at the end of sitting weeks on the Sky network, and will soon be available as a downloadable file from the Parliament's website. Journalists and other media form a considerable body of subscribers to the products of the office, and the House and the media alike, regard the activities of the office as significantly beneficial in packaging and disseminating information to the media about the work of the Parliament.

⁹ Other outreach measures are referred to in the annual reports of the Department of the House of Representatives; see in particular the activities of the Liaison and Projects Office. Recent annual reports can be found at <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/dept/index.htm>

¹⁰ http://www.aph.gov.au/house/house_news/index.htm

Outlook for the relationship

Arguably, in Australia's Parliament House there are generous physical access arrangements and guidelines for media personnel within the building, which create opportunities to interview, photograph and film Members of Parliament, as well as generous access to audio visual material from the official feeds of all available parliamentary proceedings. Nevertheless, claims frequently come from members of the Press Gallery that their access to Senators, Members and proceedings is inadequate. Sometimes this leads to requests for special access arrangements, which are often agreed to. It is also the case that the guidelines and other rules have been responsive to requests for more liberal access and to technological advances, which have supported more extensive access for the media.

Successful parliamentary relations with the media are dependent upon sound ongoing communication between the Parliament and the Press Gallery. The existence of the President of the Press Gallery provides a valuable linkage between the media at Parliament House and the Presiding Officers so that there can be dialogue when specific issues arise, or when seeking generally to balance the competing interests in the media access policy and its administration.