



ASGP



Conference on broadcasting of parliamentary business through dedicated TV channels and public broadcasting systems

**organized jointly by the IPU, the ASGP and EBU
Thursday 19 October 2006 - CICG Geneva (Switzerland)**

**Conclusions by the Rapporteur, Mr. Erik Fichtelius,
Executive Producer and Editor of SVT 24 Direct (Sweden)**

**"Public service is service for citizens,
with independent, quality programmes"**

During this conference many questions were raised, for example: is broadcasting of parliamentary activities in the public interest? The answer is definitely yes. Why should we broadcast from parliament? Because there is a need to create a direct link between citizens and media, and to close the gap between citizens and parliament. There is a need for citizens to be informed and there is a need for parliaments to reach out to the people.

This should not be perceived as a threat to existing media outlets. Rather, it fosters the growth of news outlets and does not exclude news reporting. One colleague said today that "once it is live, nobody can take it away. Even if you try to take it away from the archives, it is still there and it is worth a lot". Having said that, the quality of live broadcasting is also extremely important.

Are there problems? Yes, there are some problems which need to be solved, such as the ten-second sound bite discussed all over the world. This is a great background for C-SPAN operations. But today, in the USA, sound bites are only 7.2 seconds long, and the trend is for even shorter ones.

Parliamentary activities are boring, unattractive, and could be considered a "ghetto" segment. Our colleague from BBC Parliament said that parliamentary business is only watched by interested persons. How do we make it interesting? There are ways of doing it and we should not be too worried about ratings. "Reach" is a far more important concept and the experience of all broadcasters is that big news will always attract big audiences.

Dividing line

There is a dividing line between the participants as to what to do and how to do it, or who should decide what to broadcast. Should the broadcasting of parliamentary business be controlled by parliament or by independent media? I would advise all parliamentary officials to listen to the experience of the broadcasters present here. We unanimously believe in independent editorial decisions and that they are good for everybody.

But we still hear some remarks from colleagues, such as our Chilean counterpart, who says that parliamentarians should have the right to have at least one positive channel. It is an argument, but it may not be the best one.

When you want to make real human beings out of members of parliament, reflect on different opinions, have an open and fair forum, or project the image that MPs are honest and straight-talking, that might be considered as propaganda. You are then taking a big risk in terms of credibility. There are many who are against parliament-controlled activities. You will risk being the target of politicians and thus lose credibility.

If you broadcast from parliament, what happens to other political activities? The most successful parliamentary or political channels, are the ones which cover the entire political process, such as Phoenix, C-SPAN, SVT 24 Direct, which is under my responsibility, or BBC Parliament. It gives a much better understanding of political life as a whole.

Parliaments are critical of the media. Members of parliament think that the press will project negative images. They feel they do not get positive attention, and that too much attention is given to scandals and political games, rather than to real issues. These complaints are voiced by politicians in all parts of the world.

Recommendations

My recommendation is that broadcasting of parliamentary activities should be done in an independent manner, with pluralism and free media - elements that lend credibility. Professional criteria can be identified as to what will and will not go on the air. News should be credible. The full political process and the goings-on outside the halls of the parliament can be reflected.

Crucial questions should be asked when we continue to venture into political broadcasting. Is full coverage of parliamentary activities recommended? Are we sometimes interested in sensationalism? Is public control of what is said somehow lost? Perhaps, but that is something that has to be accepted. Public service is a service for citizens, with independent, quality programmes. In Europe, we have a tradition of strong public service companies, and many of us have been inspired by the BBC. The Scandinavian countries have very strong public service corporations, which serve as a sound platform for this new undertaking into political channel broadcasting.

What is the difference between a political channel and a commercial channel? Can one really be impartial and promote social ideas? Encouraged by the vast possibilities offered by new technologies, the time for action is now. Currently there are one billion Internet users and that figure is growing every day. Ten years ago, no frequencies were available whereas today we have a range of frequencies to use. Internet provides wonderful opportunities and digital distribution on terrestrial transmitting stations and satellites expands the range of frequencies, which are opening up to markets and political or parliamentary broadcasters.

Broadcasting and webcasting are very much present, and if broadcasting and documentaries are combined on a single home page - as opted for by the Swedish Parliament and many other parliaments - we have an amazing political tool for citizens and a protocol for parliaments. Government- and opposition-generated documents, as well as background documents and MP voting records could also be of great interest.

The Swedish model

Live streaming is now a possibility on the web. On my channel, SVT 24 Direct, we do live streaming of everything we come across, and we have a large audience on the web page. What about political activities, costs and edited material? Should they be handled in-house or externally from a technical point of view? What kind of agreement should be drawn up between broadcasters and parliaments? In Sweden, we have consciously avoided drawing up any agreement between ourselves and parliament, because, as a broadcaster, I think that would be problematic.

We are not quite so organized. We choose what proceedings in parliament to broadcast and we do it in such a way that the Swedish parliament provides the clean signal to the television tower and from there any media outlet in Sweden - be it commercial television, public service television or newspapers with webcasting capacity - can take the signal from parliament. The quality of the television production is very good.

The problem arises when parliament controls the production. We risk not getting pictures when something extraordinary happens in the parliament, such as scenes of protesters, people dying, etc. In Sweden, we have solved this problem by making it possible for any media outlet, if it so wishes, to work on the basis of a "pooled" position and we are able to take our own footage inside the parliament. On a normal day in

parliament we are satisfied with the pictures we receive and we can make a good selection. But that remains our editorial decision.

How can we make it interesting? Television is the most popular medium, and the criteria for scheduling mentioned by Peter Knowles of BBC Parliament is extremely important. Broadcasting 24 hours a day is important because viewers can identify with the schedule over many years. The tools of professional journalism are important if we want to make it interesting. The Phoenix provides some useful insights. Analysis and commentary are necessary to make programmes understandable. Combining these ingredients with documents on the web will give citizens an inside view of what is going on.

Another crucial question is who controls the cameras? As we have to deal with filming regulations and rules of engagement, should we broadcast everything? The experience of the British Parliament, where committee hearings are placed on the website, is to allow freedom of access to everything. My channel will broadcast only the things we find interesting from parliament. This is our freedom.

There is a reason why committee meetings in many parliaments are held *in camera*. Parliamentarians must have the possibility of discussing issues before decisions are taken. Our experience in Sweden is that the most popular programmes are the open committee hearings. We also broadcast government press conferences, but the question remains: how can the opposition be heard? We have press conference rooms and four locations within the Swedish Parliament equipped with television cameras and available for the opposition to rebut and to be heard from parliament - which is the proper forum for rebuttal.

In terms of cooperation, as a broadcaster, I find the suggestion made by our EBU colleagues extremely interesting. I am not only a citizen of Sweden, but also a citizen of the European Union. How can I take part in the political debate in Europe? Television is one way. The European Parliament produces very good coverage of the proceedings in parliament and we get it with direct simultaneous translation into Swedish. Broadcasting is therefore not a problem, and many Swedes are more aware of the political issues in Europe affecting them, such as the debate about the new constitution of the European Union, climate change, Turkey's prospects of accession, or European views about the war in Iraq.

Establishing a mechanism such as the one proposed by the EBU to "organize the chaos" could facilitate citizens' understanding of what is going on. It is an extremely good idea.

The responsibility of parliament

One thing that has not been mentioned is the responsibility of the parliament itself. How can it modernize its procedures? The Swedish Parliament has introduced new rules and procedures to make the debates more understandable and interesting. For example, the debate starts with the majority explaining its proposals. The public can then understand what the opposition is debating. We have also introduced a new form of debate called "actual debate on current issues".

Independence is of paramount importance. We have a large audience, with two channels. We broadcast terrestrially and we usually have approximately one per cent of the population viewing all the time. When we have highlights, between four and five per cent of the population are watching, which shows that there is an interest.

As a broadcaster with 25 years of experience in radio before embarking on television, I must say that the comments made about radio are very interesting. In many countries, this is something which must be taken into consideration. You can have a good audience by combining radio, television and the Internet. That makes it truly possible to reach out to citizens. There is a new development in broadcasting and in political life: citizens are becoming much more involved in the political process.

A German study explains why people dislike politicians. Attitudes were tested against the way politicians were presented on television and it was found that, if a leading politician was allowed to speak in his own voice and with his own face, people would

respect him much more. Under the political system that allows us to elect representatives, politicians are deserving of respect. As independent broadcasters, if we can be a part of this overall scheme of things, that would be a good thing.