Training Parliamentary Journalists in Developing Countries

by Chris Cobb

The most stable, thriving democracies share at least one common trait: A free and independent news media and journalists who enjoy decent salaries, basic job stability and a recognized and respected place in the political business of the nation. Not so in much of the developing world. This article looks at the experience of one Canadian journalist who has participated in training programmes for journalists in various developing countries, particularly those who cover parliamentary institutions.

It was in the Nigerian capital Abuja, several years ago, where I first showed journalists video from Canada's Question Period and the unique experience of post-Question Period scrums. Art Eggleton was Liberal defence minister and taking heat for some now-forgotten tempest.

After taking a battering in the Commons, Mr. Eggleton emerged from the Commons to face the press pack and was subject to some harsh and not always polite interrogation. In the simple Abuja meeting room, I was watching the participants in my workshop as they watched events unfold on the TV. Occasionally, I stopped the VCR to explain the process, explain who was who and answer any questions.

> "Excuse me, Mr. Cobb," said one. "But did you say that person is the defence minister – the person in charge of the Canadian army?"
>
> "And the navy and the air force," I replied.
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> And then they all laughed. I was puzzled.
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> "Chris," said the same person with deliberate understatement. "We don't think our defence minister would take so kindly to such questions."

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Nigeria was taking its first baby steps towards democracy under President Olusegun Obasanjo and the journalists assigned to cover national politics were especially cautious.

And I was taking my first baby steps as a trainer of parliamentary journalists in emerging democracies – supposedly teaching but more often than not learning in equal measure. The conditions under which many dedicated journalists in the developing world practice their craft can be awe-inspiring.

I held my third workshop for members of Nigeria's national assembly press corps in the late fall last year and while their attitude was clearly more confident, the obstacles they face in their day-to-day working lives remain formidable.

The most effective political journalists in developing, or faux democracies often risk everything for little reward. They lose far too much, far too often. Think Sri Lanka and think Pakistan where it has been open season on journalists for at least the last couple of years.

Even journalists working in countries where politicians seem genuinely interested in giving a reasonable facsimile of democracy a fair shot, political journalists live a daily grind of disrespect, low and unpredictable pay, inadequate job security, poor working conditions and excessive demands from their bosses.

And, of course, obstructive governments whose primary aim seems to be withholding as much

information from the people as they possible can. (That particular trait is not confined to emerging democracies as a perusal of the Canadian Information Commissioner's last report to Parliament confirms).

> ***Most members of Parliament dread their constituencies for fear of being committed to the promises they made during their political campaigns. They shield themselves from the media to avoid being asked to comment on issues they are not familiar with. What qualifies them to be elected into office is primarily their loyalty to a political party, not their intellectual capabilities.***
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> *A Nigerian journalist*
> *Abudja training session*
> *Fall 2009*

Since that first visit to Abuja, I have held workshops for political journalists in numerous other countries, including Malaysia, Guyana, Ghana and Bangladesh.

I still take the latest CPAC recordings – now on CD – and I have added British Prime Minister's question time to the mix largely because its presentation tends to be visually more interesting. The Canadian version has not progressed a great deal in that regard since the first broadcast from the Commons in 1977. But it engages audiences in places where legislatures have yet to take the leap into TV.

At the outset of my more recent workshops I have added a session with politicians. Typically, I ask members of opposing parties to speak openly to the participating journalists about how they perceive news media and what they think of the coverage they get. It is a conversation that rarely, if ever, happens in any jurisdiction but it provides an excellent and provocative starting point for an examination of the journalist's place in the political process.

I am firmly on the side of the journalists but strongly believe that mutual respect, and understanding for the respective journalistic and political roles, has to be at the foundation of their relationship. Journalists and politicians do not have to like or even trust each other but the politicians deserve fair and balanced coverage and the journalists need freedom and independence to properly function. That, in essence, is always my starting point.

In my political reporting workshops I typically ask participants to draw up a wish list of things that would make their daily working lives better and more efficient. The lists are remarkably similar from country to country.

"The single obstacle hindering parliamentary reporting in Ghana," one journalist wrote to me, "is the inability of reporters to have access to committee meetings. This makes it impossible for reporters to have first-hand information about how decisions were arrived before being submitted to the plenary session for discussions."

This is one of the most common, and certainly justified, complaints among parliamentary journalists in developing democracies. As we know, committees are where much of the real work is done. Journalists I have encountered in my sessions have to make do with the final, *fait accompli* session in the main legislature.

The typical defence from the governing party is that committees are where elected representatives can express their opinions and have an open and frank exchange of ideas away from journalistic prying. These are not cases of committees occasionally going into camera but rather a systematic blanket ban on news media. The fact that the journalist is the ears and eyes of the voters seems to escape these democratically-elected politicians.

Also high on the wish lists are stable salaries and good working facilities, after the fashion of the "Hot Room."

Reporters for state-owned media, which proliferate in the developing world are usually well-paid but privately-owned newspapers, TV and radio stations are usually not. News media are licensed but there are no enforceable provisions that force owners to pay living wages and no unions to press their cases. Inevitably it leads to corruption.

In Nigeria, they call it "Brown Envelope Syndrome." Among Canadian journalists, the phrase "brown envelope" suggests a government document sent anonymously to a reporter by a whistle blower. In Nigeria, it has a more Mulroneyesque connotation.

One unsympathetic Nigerian participant listed it as a major reason why journalists get little respect.

> It's one obstacle created by the journalists themselves, and it has affected the credibility and respect of the profession. They go to functions expecting 'tokens.' This has created a general impression that journalists are professional beggars. So in a situation where they want to see the politician for clarity of information or

> an interview, the politician feels they are just looking for a way to get money out of him or her.

A parliamentary aide told me that poorly-funded journalists are commonly compromised in their ability to gather news, especially from outside the capital.

> They cannot easily balance report on what the politicians tell them and what is out truly out there," she said "Likewise, the corrupt nature of the Nigerian society makes parliamentary reporters an extension of larger society corruption. My experience of journalists, who visit my boss for facts, ends with the journalist awaiting something in return. Most times, the relationship between the two is give me and I will write or publish as you wish.

Politicians will sometimes pay the expenses of a journalist to visit a constituency – the equivalent of a Canadian MP paying for a Hill reporter to travel to a rural British Columbia constituency during a riding visit to write about the MPs good works. The ethical implications are obvious.

Not that the better-off reporters for state-owned media are without their gripes. "As a reporter reporting for a state-owned newspaper," wrote one, "some opposition Members of Parliament perceive you as an agent of the government."

There are other frustrations such as a lack of proper working and filing facilities for journalists within the parliamentary precincts – understandable to an extent because some legislatures are not fully equipped with facilities for the politicians and their staffs. But I have heard many grumbles from reporters who have to run to an off-site Internet café to write and file stories before dashing back to cover another event.

Where there is none, I encourage the forming of a structured press gallery or journalists group which would lease with politicians and parliamentary authorities on behalf of all the press corps. In some countries – Ghana, for example – such groups exist but with government involvement. In Canada, the news media house decides who it wants as its parliamentary correspondents but in Accra, the journalists' committee in the legislature has the final say, along with approval of the government representative.

I also encourage the adopting of clear sets of ethical standards – drawn up, if necessary, in consultation with politicians and other stakeholders. Developing ethics codes is always a challenge and while there are some common sense rules that govern us all, there is no one-size that perfectly fits all. Aside from giving reporters, especially young reporters, an ethical roadmap, it can go some way in building professional trust and mutual respect.

In Dhaka early last year, a journalist asked if it was appropriate for a Parliamentary reporter to give paid communications advice to politicians. I said no and gave my reasons. He then asked whether it would be acceptable if no payment was involved. Our ethics discussion was scheduled to last 90 minutes but I was still holding court on the subject in the corridor outside our meeting room three hours later and the following morning we went at it again and it was not on the agenda. It is one workshop session that always runs overtime.

At the end of the workshops, wherever they are held, a certificate of participation given individually to each journalist with a handshake is the closing act. The certificates are important.

It is also my habit to encourage participants to continue communicating with me via email or SKYPE should they ever need help on a story or advice on any other aspect of their work. I often receive emails out of the blue from journalists who have been in my workshops – sometimes seeking help, sometimes just asking "how is it going?" Any sense of connectedness to the international community of parliamentary journalists is a huge benefit.

It is, of course, impossible to affect significant change in a week-long workshop but you can plant seeds and encourage journalists who typically practice self-censorship to push the limits a little.

But it is a fine balance. Where the government has direct or indirect control over the news media, which is more or less the situation in all developing countries, there is no value in telling journalists to write or broadcast "the Canadian way" because it could land them in jail, lose them their jobs or worse. Change for the better can only be incremental.

Shortly after my Nigeria workshop last fall, I received a rather formal note from reporter Terhemba Daka of *The Guardian* newspaper's Abuja bureau.

> I must acknowledge the fact that the workshop on Parliament and the Media has greatly influenced my reportage of the parliament in Nigeria, particularly the House of Representatives where I am assigned to cover. One thing I have learnt, I must confess, is that the training has helped to build my confidence especially when faced with a complex dilemma and other controversial issues in the cause of covering the legislature.

When it comes to feedback that, as any teacher or trainer will tell you, is about as good as it gets.