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# Parliamentarians and the Media

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Laurie Comtois

*In October 2011 a symposium on Democracy, Parliamentarians and the Media was held to mark the 125th anniversary of the Parliament Building and the 140th anniversary of the Québec Parliament Press Gallery. Over 400 participants attended the event including Jacques Attali, special adviser to former French President François Mitterrand, and Vicente Fox, former President of Mexico who gave the opening and closing addresses. Three ex-journalists who are now Members of the National Assembly shared their insights during a round-table discussion. The following is a summary of the topics broached and the thoughts expressed during the symposium.*

Media convergence, the development of new technologies and the expansion of online social networks and are all drivers of change that are fuelling the identity crisis journalism is currently going through. This upheaval is having an impact on both the balance between hard news and opinion and the relationship between the media and political institutions.

In his opening address, Jacques Attali highlighted the fact that media ownership by press conglomerates means higher expectations for short-term profitability. Journalism is caught in a financial vise, as it were, between owners who want a better return for their money on the one hand, and dwindling advertising revenue on the other. Attali also reminded his audience that democracy, the media and the market are interdependent parts of the same whole. Vicente Fox concurred in his closing address and described the emergence of media oligopolies and the tighter control of information for the benefit of private interests as major causes for concern.

Professor Jean Charron of the Laval University information and communications department stressed that journalistic content today is drowned in a flood of other media content of various types. Against this backdrop, the competition for two resources that are the lifeblood of journalism—money and the public's attention—is increasingly intense. Since advertisers can now choose from an unprecedented variety of media channels (mass or specialized, print, radio or Web media; local, regional or national media, etc.) to promote

their products and services, securing funding through advertising has become an additional challenge for the media. The explosion of choices offered by the media, online social networks and the Web are also contributing to making the public's attention a scarce, much-sought-after resource. Journalistic content must now compete with the content available on various platforms, which makes the journalist's job even more complicated.

On the issue of the proliferation of blogs and the exponential growth of content on the Internet, Alex S. Jones, a professor at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and a former reporter for the *New York Times*, observed that the Web is all about getting the story out fast, while journalism is all about getting to the hard core of facts behind the story. He cited these conflicting thrusts as the reason why the media are sometimes compelled to make choices that go against the fundamental principles of journalism. In addition, the culture of free access to information introduced by the Internet undermines the market value of information, which means news entrepreneurs must lower their news production costs.

The use of social media by parliamentarians to reach out to their constituents is also proving controversial. New technologies specialist Bruno Guglielminetti, Manager of Digital Communications at NATIONAL Public Relations Inc., remains convinced that despite their flaws, the Web and the social media are useful tools for staying informed, following the political scene and engaging in debate on public issues.

Tamara A. Small, professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Guelph, is of a different mind and rather skeptical as to the usefulness

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*Laurie Comtois is a member of the Communications Directorate with the Québec National Assembly.*

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of social media for connecting with the public. She noted that effective use of these forums requires a strategy and considerable resources, including time, an already rare and valuable commodity for both journalists and parliamentarians. Jacques Attali and Vicente Fox both said they would like to see parliaments embrace new technologies as means of getting to know and better understanding the people they serve.

### **Speed, a New Imperative**

Both parliamentarians and the media must come to grips with what has undeniably become a new imperative: speed. Jacques Attali talked about what he calls the “tyranny of instantaneity”, which creates a fast-flowing stream of information and in turn has an impact on how media, political and parliamentary actors go about their work.

Shorter turnaround times and the brief lifespan of news stories add to the complexity of the journalistic endeavour. Reporters have less and less time for the in-depth research required to put the facts and events in context and craft news reports. The surge of all-news channels is also forcing the media to adjust. These channels broadcast 24/7—a tremendous output. But as former Québec minister and mayor of Québec City Jean-Paul L’Allier put it, quoting Robert Bourassa, “Nothing’s older than yesterday’s newspaper.” This aptly illustrates the fleeting nature of the news cycle and the fast-paced setting that media and political players are now confronted with.

Political parties must also learn to ride the wave in order to grab the media’s attention and stay in the public eye. They sometimes prefer quick, tangible solutions, leaving in-depth reflection on major issues for later. Rushed by the pace at which news stories come and go, they scramble to review their strategies and react, sometimes without having had the time to do the necessary legwork. Gilbert Lavoie, a political columnist with the Québec City daily *Le Soleil*, also lamented the political parties’ promptness to react to each and every item that makes the headlines, as well as their lack of preparation.

This fast-moving environment is also making the work of elected representatives more and more difficult as their role requires them to have a long-term vision and aim for lasting results. It is not easy to sell the public on decisions and policies whose effects will only be felt sometime down the road while the media and political groups are drawing attention to immediate problems that call for swift action. The three MNAs on the panel for the round-table discussion, Christine St-Pierre, Gérard Deltell and Bernard Drainville, described how hard it is to get coverage for certain issues—like

those they debate in parliamentary committee or must address in their ridings—which they believe to be of public interest but which generate little attention and are not considered “hot” or “sexy” by the media. Josée Legault, a columnist with *Voir*, echoed the concern expressed by journalist Gilbert Lavoie about the shorter and shorter time that journalists and parliamentarians now have to process facts and events in the news. The accelerating flow of information leaves little room for reflection and makes stories harder and harder to follow, both for those covering them and for those trying to stay on top of them.

### **Transparency and the Public Interest**

The principle of “open government” and transparency is a strong symbol of democracy. Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign is often cited as an example and many countries have since formulated like-minded policies. According to some, transparency makes government more efficient, curbs corruption, holds public decision makers accountable, requires more accountability reporting on the part of civil servants, boosts public trust and promotes citizen engagement. But how this translates into practice is a whole other matter and Anne-Marie Gingras, a political science professor at Laval University, reminded all present that, for open government to work, it must be part of a public management philosophy that is in sharp contrast with the current model and must filter down from the top.

A number of panellists stressed the public service aspect of news reporting and the need to continue to provide public funding for it. Suzanne Legault, Information Commissioner of Canada, stated that the right to information is a basic right and that leadership is needed, among elected representatives and voters alike, to protect that right. An advocate of better democratic and citizenship education, she argued that journalists and parliamentarians must continue to defend an administrative and legislative framework that facilitates the flow of information.

In conclusion, for several of the speakers and panellists, news reporting, like democracy, is a public asset that must be financed out of public funds. The increasing concentration of media ownership and the swallowing up of press outlets by profit-hungry media giants are worrisome trends: public funding for news reporting must be brought back to the fore of our concerns to ensure the sustainability of a healthy democracy.

The symposium proceedings will be published in Spring 2012 and posted on the National Assembly’s website at [assnat.qc.ca](http://assnat.qc.ca).