

About Parliament 36

Parliament and the Media

Our knowledge and understanding of parliament and politics in Western Australia, and beyond to national and international politics, is mostly conveyed by the media.

Both the Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly allocate a section of the public gallery for media representatives and there are media offices located in Parliament House.

The media's role needs to be understood in order to comprehend the ebb and flow of everyday politics.

'Free press or media without government interference' is universally acknowledged to be a vital element of a democratic system.

Some of the main roles of the media include:

- summarising parliamentary and other political, legal and social events;
- describing the actions of parliamentarians, especially the Premier, ministers, the Leader of the Opposition, and shadow ministers;
- presenting and investigating a range of political views and opinions, including those expressed in 'Letters to the Editor';
- providing an avenue by which the government, and more broadly the parliament, can be held accountable to citizens; and
- re-enforcing of some pre-existing opinions and values, or shaping opinion when they are not fixed on firmly held values.

The general term 'media' includes all the agencies and products that serve to deliver information, opinion, and entertainment.

This includes the print media, such as newspapers and magazines, and the electronic media such as radio, television and cyberspace.

Community newspapers are very important for parliamentarians in many districts and regions. In addition many trade magazines often play a political role.

Television and radio, including state and national public broadcasters and commercial stations, are important media channels.

Television is frequently regarded as a most important source of political information. The emergence of talk-back radio in the last generation has given many citizens the opportunity to engage with their parliamentarians.

More recent, but quite significant, has been the cyberspace 'revolution'. Included under this umbrella is e-mail which readily enables communication opportunities for citizens to contact their parliamentarians.

The internet provides easy access to search engines and vast on-line resources from around the globe. Discussion environments such as 'blogs' offer opportunities to be better informed about, and participate in, the policy process.

It is even possible to listen or watch on-line to debates in the Legislative Council and the Legislative Assembly or to conduct a 'virtual tour' of Parliament House¹.

¹ Visit www.parliament.wa.gov.au for more information.

In March 2006 the Parliamentary History Advisory Committee commissioned a community survey aimed at understanding people's attitudes to parliamentarians and the democracy in which Western Australians live.

One of the questions read as 'How often would you use any of these sources to understand the parliamentary system?'

The attributes listed were family, friends, school, university/college, media (general), newspaper, magazines, television, radio, and Internet. For each attribute respondents were asked to indicate either a lot, sometimes, hardly at all or never.

When classifying the scores received for 'a lot' and 'sometimes' as being reasonably well used sources of information, it is evident that newspapers are considered to be the primary source (68.8 per cent), followed by television (61.3 per cent).

When classified by the most frequent use ('a lot') scores, television is the primary source of information (19.8 per cent), followed by newspapers (16.5 per cent), magazines (14.0 per cent) and radio (12.8 per cent).

Survey Results

