

**REHA DENEMEC**  
**Seminar on Parliamentary Ethics and Accountability**  
**United States Senate**  
**Room SD-G11**  
**'Role of the Media'**  
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Thank you very much ladies and gentlemen. The topic assigned to me, 'The Role of the Media', could easily fill five days, let alone five minutes. Nonetheless, in this brief period I will attempt to articulate our government's view on the role of the press – at least in Turkey.

First, we believe very strongly that in a real democracy it is not up to the government to determine the role of the media. A free media is just that -- free from government interference. The media has the right to be foolish, wrong, sensational, or just plain funny. I think we have a very lively media in Turkey, but we are hardly alone. Just look at the United States where the newspapers range from the fanciful *National Enquirer* with stories about aliens descending on Ohio to the staid, respected *New York Times* or *Washington Post*, often taken as the gold standard of journalism. The tabloids in England are famous for their sensationalism. And no one would ever accuse the media in India of being dull. Despite our occasional frustrations with the media we still agree with the First Amendment of the American Constitution that says among other things that Congress shall make no laws limiting the freedom of speech or of the press.

Those of us in politics have to accept that there is a natural adversarial role between politicians and the media. We love reporters when they praise us and call us geniuses. When they take the opposite point of view we think they should be shut down. This tense relationship between politicians and the media is not at all new. None other

than Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States, commented bitterly that “advertisements are the only truthful part of the newspapers.” And that was 200 years ago.

Regardless of the presence or lack of government control, the media remains the vital link in shaping opinion. In addition to its undeniable role as entertainment the media is the primary filter through which government policy is communicated at home and abroad. As political leaders, preparing good legislation is only part of our job. If we can’t convince our own citizens at home or our friends in other countries that these policies make sense then we have failed. Briefly stated, we believe that democracy is as good as the information provided to the people. Give the people bad or simply wrong information and they make wrong choices. Make the government transparent, provide regular, honest information and the people will make more informed choices. In other words, governments that trust the people will earn the people’s trust. Don’t hide bad news and don’t inflate good news. The media obviously plays a crucial role in transmitting this news as accurately as possible. All we ask of the media is to transmit the basic facts as clearly as possible. The people have a right to the basic facts, and they will make their decisions based on these facts. Commentators will interpret the news anyway they want. That’s part of politics – some people like you, some people dislike you.

Obviously public policy is shaped and influenced by many different interest groups including politicians, bureaucrats, business groups, academics, cultural groups, or civil organizations. But once policy is determined it must be effectively communicated to several different audiences to get their support and be successful. And it is right at this junction where the role of the media is critical. Without infringing upon freedom of the

media we – as political leaders – must understand how to work effectively and intelligently with the media to inform a broad range of people **what** we are doing and **why** we are doing it.

Exactly **How** to do this is another large topic that we do not have time to examine right now. I would just like to add from our own experience it is much better to be very proactive rather than sit back and simply react to anything that appears in the media. Issuing a press release to newspapers and televisions is simply not enough. If we want to convince people of a new policy or change long-held negative opinions we must use every tool available. Again, this is hardly a new idea. More than 200 years ago the newly formed United States prepared a new constitution. But it had to convince skeptical people that this new constitution with its strong central government was an improvement over the existing loose confederation. A number of key statesmen including Alexander Hamilton and James Madison wrote a series of essays that appeared in newspapers throughout the country. These brilliant essays, later known as the Federalist Papers, played a key role in shaping public opinion. One wishes we saw the same effort as the European Union struggles with its constitution today.

At the very least we must understand how the media works. Among many other things it means understanding simple issues like deadlines and news cycles, and that nothing is more useless than yesterday's news. But more than anything it means understanding how the media has changed over the last twenty years. In my father's time political leaders only had to be concerned about newspapers and radio. Now newspapers and radio are only part of the matrix. More than 60 years ago, the famous American

journalist A.J. Liebling wrote that “freedom of the press is limited to those who own one.”

This is no longer the case. Now the world is blanketed by 24-hour news channels, cable channels, and special interest channels. News is getting divided into ever smaller pieces to fit small, niche outlets. On top of this we have the internet. With minimal computer knowledge, a telephone and a website you can become an instant media outlet. Just think how many major news stories in recent years have been broken on the internet, and only later picked up by the so-called main stream media. Most countries I know have created organizations to oversee the media. I know of very few, if any, countries that have developed oversight commissions for the internet. The Americans are having a great deal of difficulty figuring out how to do deal with something as simple as *spam* without violating the First Amendment. How much more difficult is it going to be to bring internet news – the so-called *blogs* – under some kind of control?

In addition to the internet there are other developments that give us some concern. One of the realities is that while global television has expanded in breadth it remains very shallow. Countries other than the United States, some of those in the European Union, Russia, and perhaps China all have the same complaint. Television is crucial because it is the way the vast majority of people around the world get news these days. Yet, with the exception of wars, natural disasters or major political changes it is almost impossible for most countries to get air time. Just look at the average report on international stations like CNN and see how many stories originate from Washington, London, or, these days, Baghdad. Very, very few TV stations have the budget required to come to our countries

to cover normal economic or social developments. And yet, there are good stories in countries like India, Brazil, Mexico, Malaysia, Algeria, and Turkey that don't involve civil wars, earthquakes or other mayhem. Complaining about this is not going to accomplish anything. We have to recognize this reality and take our stories to them in a form they will use.

Another major development that concerns us is the concentration of media power into ever fewer hands. Turkey, for example, has many different newspapers ranging across the political spectrum. But the vast majority of the total daily circulation of just over three million is in the hands of one group. Turkey is not alone. The United States has about 1,600 daily newspapers, and most of these are now owned by large groups. Is this good or bad? I don't really know. But I think we have to be very careful of the potential to centralize news decisions to the point where a select number of people in a few groups determine what constitutes news.

We must also be very careful about potential conflict of interest when large media groups also own other companies in sensitive sectors like finance. We think it is very dangerous for media groups to also own banks. On the one hand you own an institution charged with the responsibility of protecting the public's savings and on the other hand you own a powerful tool to shape public opinion.

As I mentioned at the beginning discussions about the media can take days. I hope I have highlighted a few of the issues that we can discuss more fully with your questions and participation.

Thank you.