



I·P·I

INTERNATIONAL PRESS INSTITUTE

ACCESSING GOVERNMENTS

PILOT PROJECT

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Introduction

In many countries around the world, journalists lack the fundamental right to access even the most basic information about the activities of those who govern them – information they need to carry out their vital work of holding governments accountable and informing the public of matters of interest.

Preventing journalists from accessing information impedes their ability to report on issues accurately, and it is no coincidence that in countries in which governments are reluctant to provide information, journalists are far more likely to face criticism and criminal sanction for allegedly getting the story wrong.

In light of this, IPI’s “Accessing Governments” pilot project aimed to survey the comparative difficulties that journalists around the world face when attempting to obtain information from official government sources.

With the help of local media organisations in 12 countries, and over the period of one working week in each case, we measured the willingness and speed of official government sources when answering questions from journalists, limiting ourselves to investigating the problems journalists face while making informal requests for straightforward information – the kind that should be easily available without recourse to Freedom of Information legislation.

We have used the final results to compile a ranking of the countries surveyed, which can be found on page seven of this report. We urge those governments surveyed to take note of the results and, if necessary, to examine and overhaul their information-providing structures.

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Project Procedure

Starting on a given Monday morning, media organisations in 12 different countries¹ approached three government institutions and asked each of them two questions.

The questions were designed so that the first one would be very easy to answer, and the second slightly more difficult. The questions were standardised across the project in order to provide a fair basis for comparison.

After the participating media had asked the questions, they recorded how long it took the institutions to return a satisfactory answer. The media organisations were also encouraged to ‘prompt’ the institutions with a reminder, should the information not be forthcoming.

On the understanding that journalists usually work to tight deadlines, we gave the government offices a working week to respond, with any responses arriving later than this not counted in the survey.

The government offices approached in each country were those of the head of government, the Justice Ministry (or the equivalent) and Parliament (or the equivalent).

*

¹ The 12 countries were Argentina, Australia, Kenya, India, Philippines, Russia, Serbia, Singapore, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States and Yemen; IPI’s intention was to include media from each of the global regions.

Ranking the Countries

IPI ranked the countries on a points-basis, measuring the government offices' response to *each individual question*. A satisfactory answer to any of the given questions was worth a maximum of 20 points, this value decreasing gradually as time elapsed, from 20 points to 10 if the answer took over three hours to arrive, from 10 to five points if the participating media received no answer within 24 hours, and from five points to 2.5 points if the answer arrived between 48 hours and the end of the working week. The table below helps to illustrate this:

0-3 hours: 20 points	3-24 hours: 10 points	24-48 hours: 5 points	48-120 hours: 2.5 points
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If the final answer provided by the particular government office was unsatisfactory, further points were deducted at IPI's discretion.

By measuring the response to each individual question in this manner, IPI was able to assess the performance of the individual government institutions it approached, each earning a maximum of 40 points if they answered both questions promptly.

In addition, IPI combined the points earned in each country to create a comparative ranking, which can be found on page seven of this report.

Pages 8 to 19 of this report detail the results for each country separately.

*

Project Questions

The 12 participating media organisations asked the following questions:

To the Head of Government:

- 1) What was the President / Prime Minister's salary in 2008?
- 2) What were the travel costs incurred by the President / Prime Minister while on state visits in 2008?

To the Justice Ministry:

- 1) What was the Justice Minister's salary in 2008?
- 2) How many pieces of draft legislation were introduced by the Justice Ministry in 2008?

To Parliament:

- 1) What is the salary for a parliamentarian (or the equivalent in your country)?
- 2) How many parliamentarians (or the equivalent in your country) have held their seat for more than 10 years?

N.B.: The answers to some of the questions may be readily available in certain countries (i.e., if they are published online) or are common knowledge. If so, it was left to the participating journalist to decide whether or not the question needed to be asked or if full points should be allocated for that question straight away.

Final Ranking

Rank	Country	Total Points
1	Australia	120
2	Singapore	115
3	Serbia	100
4	India	95
5	The Philippines	85
6	United Kingdom	75
7	United States	60
8	Russia	47.5
9	Argentina	40
12	Turkey	0
-	Yemen	0
-	Kenya	0

Argentina

Capital: Buenos Aires
Population: 41 million
Government Type: Federal Presidential Republic

Final Ranking out of 12:

9th

The media in Argentina is free, but the press freedom climate has worsened in recent months. A highly controversial new media law potentially increases government influence on broadcasting, and a tax inspector raid on critical daily *Clarín* has raised allegations of political pressure on media.

Survey conducted with the help of

infobae.com

Results:

'Infobae' began the exercise on 1 June 2009 with telephone calls to the office of the President, Justice Ministry and the Secretary of Direction of Parliament.

They were able to obtain an answer to the question regarding deputies' salaries straight away from the Secretary of Direction at Parliament, who also told them where to look online for information regarding the number of deputies serving terms of over 10 years, although they would have to collate the information themselves for each deputy individually.

However, Infobae had significantly less success approaching both the office of the president and the Justice Ministry.

Despite confirmation from both offices that the questions were being dealt with, and despite prompts from the participating journalist on the first, second and third days of the exercise, Infobae was unable to obtain an answer from either office before the week was out, meaning both the offices of the president and justice minister scored zero points.

*

Points Earned	
President	0
Justice Ministry	0
Parliament	40
Total Points = 40 (9th Place)	

Australia

Capital: Canberra
Population: 22 million
Government Type: Parliamentary Democracy

Final Ranking out of 12:

1st

The media in Australia is free, and press freedom violations are rare. In September this year, in a welcome move, the Australian Federal Police announced their intention to investigate the 1975 murder of five Australia-based journalists in then-Portuguese Timor as a war crime.

Survey conducted with the help of



Results:

The survey was carried out by Seven Network's Canberra press gallery bureau, the network's major interface with the federal government. They began on Monday 18 May with emails to the prime minister's press office and the attorney general's press adviser and a telephone call to the clerk of the House of Representatives.

The prime minister's press adviser emailed a full reply, with 25 pages of Hansard regarding the prime minister's expenses in 2008 attached, within three hours of the original email.

The attorney general's press adviser was even quicker, calling Seven Network's press bureau within 10 minutes of the original email being sent with pointers on where to find the information online. He then sent a follow-up email less than two hours later containing an answer to the question on the number of legislative drafts introduced by the ministry, as well as the information on where to find the relevant information for both questions online.

The clerk at the House of Representatives was able to direct Seven Network immediately to the parliamentary website for an answer to the second question, while the information regarding members salaries is readily available on the 'remuneration tribunal' website.

*

Points Earned	
Prime Minister	40
Attorney General	40
House of Representatives	40
Total Points = 120 (1st Place)	

India

Capital: New Delhi
Population: 1,198 million
Government Type: Parliamentary Democracy

Final Ranking out of 12:

4th

The media in most parts of India is generally free from government pressure, although other concerns do exist. Journalists sometimes face heavy-handed intimidation from police authorities, and reporters are at times still detained on criminal defamation charges.

Survey conducted with the help of

THE HINDU

Results:

The Hindu's Delhi bureau contacted the press office of the president on Monday, 20 July with the questions regarding the president's salary and travel expenses for the year 2008.

The office was able to provide the answer to the question regarding the president's salary on *The Hindu's* first prompt some three hours after the initial request was called in. However, for details on presidential expenses, they had to refer *The Hindu* correspondents to the External Affairs Ministry, who were unable to provide information within the allotted time.

Both the Law Minister's office and Parliament fared better, both gaining full points.

In the case of the two questions relating to Parliament, all the information is available through its official website.

The answers relating to the salary of the Minister for Law and Justice (69,000 rupees per month), as well as the question about the number of bills sent to Parliament by the ministry in 2008 (a total of 81), were provided by a ministry officer at the time promised after the first request was called in.

*

Points Earned	
Head of Government Press Office	15
Law Minister	40
Parliament	40
Total Points = 95 (4 th Place)	

Kenya

Capital: Nairobi
Population: 40 million
Government Type: Semi-Presidential Republic

Final Ranking out of 12:

12th

Kenya has a vibrant media, which sadly often faces pressure from both government and police authorities. Investigators' handling of the brutal murder this year of journalist Francis Nyaruri, found decapitated in a forest near his hometown, has raised criticism from outside observers.

Survey conducted with the help of

DAILY  NATION

Results:

The *Daily Nation* started by sending out the questions to the various government offices on Monday, 17 August.

“We made the first follow-up by telephone on Tuesday, 18 August, and subsequently made two or three calls every day. Unfortunately, we never got responses to the questions,” said the investigator at the newspaper.

“The constant answer we got was that someone was looking for the facts or figures, and would revert back to us. Nothing came through as at the end of day on Friday, August 21. In short, we never got answers to the questions.”

The *Daily Nation* informed IPI that, at the time of this survey going to print, they had still received no answer to any question from any of the government ministries addressed.

*

IPI attempted twice to obtain a comment from the Kenyan government regarding their poor performance in the “Assessing Governments” survey, through the contact email on the official website. At the time of publication, IPI had received no reply to either of their requests.

*

Points Earned	
Head of Government	0
Justice Ministry	0
Parliament	0
Total Points = 0 (12th Place)	

*

The Philippines

Capital: Manila
Population: 91 million
Government Type: Unitary Presidential Republic

Final Ranking out of 12:

5th

The media in the Philippines is free from administrative pressure. However, journalism in the country can be extremely perilous, with four murders last year and three so far in 2009. The impunity enjoyed by those who kill reporters is an obstacle to bettering this sad record.

Survey conducted with the help of



Results:

The *Daily Inquirer* informed IPI that the president's, justice minister's and members' of Parliament salaries are fixed by law in The Philippines, and information as to the amount is common knowledge. The *Inquirer* began to seek answers to the remaining questions on Monday, 29 June.

Parliament responded within one hour to the *Inquirer's* query regarding the number of deputies who (in the case of the Philippines) have held their seat for over eight years. The answer: 68 of the 268 lawmakers at the House of Representatives.

The Justice Ministry also performed relatively well. In response to the question regarding the number of bills introduced by the ministry in 2008, the ministry replied after one prompt that they were "involved in the drafting of more than 200 pieces of legislation." An answer was therefore given with relative speed. However, the answer itself was incomplete, meaning they scored only half the possible points for returning after one prompt.

The president's press office performed worst of the three government institutions contacted in The Philippines. Despite three attempts from the *Inquirer* to get an answer about the amount spent on presidential state visits in 2008, they received no answer within the allotted time period.

*

Points Earned	
President	20
Justice Ministry	25
House of Representatives	40
Total Points = 85 (5th Place)	

Russia

Capital: Moscow
Population: 142 million
Government Type: Federal Republic

Final Ranking out of 12:

8th

Russia is a country with a well-known track record of press freedom problems. Critical journalists are often harassed, sometimes violently, and all too often lose their lives. One newspaper, the *Novaya Gazeta*, has seen four journalists and two associates murdered in the last decade alone.

Survey conducted with the help of



Results:

The information regarding the Russian president's salary is available online, as is that regarding the salary for the minister of justice.

The *Sovershenno Sekretno* faxed the remaining questions to the corresponding government offices on the morning of Monday, 25 May.

The newspaper received answers to both questions addressed to Parliament on Wednesday, 27 May at around 1.25 p.m. (some 51 hours after the original request was sent in), and they then received an answer from the Justice Ministry regarding the number of pieces of draft legislation introduced in 2008 at 3.20 p.m. on Thursday, 28 May (some 75 hours after the initial request was sent).

The *Sovershenno Sekretno* did not receive an answer concerning presidential expenses.

*

Points Earned	
President	20
Justice Ministry	22.5
Parliament	5
Total Points = 47.5 (8th Place)	

Serbia

Capital: Belgrade
Population: 7.5 million
Government Type: Republic

Final Ranking out of 12:

3rd

Serbia is making some progress in improving its press freedom climate; however, journalists still receive threats over critical and investigative reporting, and the fact that the killers of three Serbian journalists murdered between 1994 and 2001 remain free is a cause for concern.

Survey conducted with the help of

Danas

Results:

The Serbian prime minister's and the Serbian justice minister's offices ranked highly in the survey, due to the amount of information easily available through official online sources. This even includes information regarding the prime minister's travel expenses (although Nikola Tomic, the *Danas* political editor assisting IPI with the project, suspected that the real expenses of ministers and their staff members "must be much higher").

The National Assembly of Serbia, however, proved more opaque.

The average monthly salary of a parliamentarian is available online. However, as Tomic explained to IPI, "in order to find out how many parliamentarians have served for over a certain period of time, it would be necessary to check the personal profiles of each individual MP, step by step for all 250 of them, because Parliament does not have that kind of information and does not have any intention to do so."

As the information available on the Assembly website regarding individual members is limited to basics such as political affiliation and committee membership, to answer the second question, a journalist would ultimately have to approach each parliamentarian personally.

*

Points Earned	
Prime Minister	40
Justice Ministry	40
Assembly of Serbia	20
Total Points = 100 (3rd Place)	

Singapore

Capital: Singapore City
Population: 5 million
Government Type: Parliamentary Republic

Final Ranking out of 12:

2nd

Singapore's government exercises tight control over all forms of media, and it is rare to read or hear critical voices. Foreign media have been censored, with authorities removing foreign newspapers from newsstands. Opposition politicians are targeted with defamation lawsuits.

Survey conducted with the help of

THE STRAITS TIMES.

Results:

According to those assisting at the *Straits Times*, answers to four of the six questions are available publicly in Singapore. They are: The prime minister's salary in 2008, the number of pieces of legislation drafted by the Home Affairs Ministry in 2008, the salary of a member of Parliament and the number of members of Parliament who have held their seat for over 10 years.

With regards to the question regarding the prime minister's travel costs in 2008, the *Straits Times* emailed the prime minister's press office on 1 June. The press secretary replied later that day to inform them that both he and the prime minister were overseas and "suggested that the information could be given after the trip." Then, without any further prompting from the newspaper, an officer from the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts telephoned the *Straits Times* to inform them that they would be able to provide the information, but may need a "day or two to compute the figures." The same officer rang back on 4 June with the answer.

With regards to the salary of the minister for home affairs, the ministry directed the *Straits Times* to the relevant office (the public service division), who in turn were able to point them within a day to an online hansard that contained the minister's salary. However, this was the salary for 2007 rather than 2008, for which the ministry was penalised points for incomplete information.

*

Points Earned	
Head of Government	40
Home Affairs Ministry	35
Parliament	40
Total Points = 115 (2nd Place)	

Turkey

Capital: Ankara
Population: 75 million
Government Type: Parliamentary Republic

Final Ranking out of 12:

12th

Media freedom has regressed in Turkey. A dispute raged between Turkish PM, Recep Erdogan, and various media, following media coverage of a corruption scandal. Erdogan called for a media boycott. The Dogan Media Group, Turkey's largest, is facing an unprecedented tax fine.

Survey conducted with the help of

Hürriyet

Results:

Emre Kizilkaya, the *Hürriyet* investigator assisting IPI with the project, began on Monday, 25 May by emailing the questions via the contact points of the Turkish Parliament, the prime minister's office and the Justice Ministry. He requested email replies. Kizilkaya followed up with three prompts to each office, also sent via email over the following three days, with the final prompt mailed at 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 27 May.

At 12.10 p.m. on Wednesday, 27 May, an official of the Turkish Parliament called the *Hürriyet* journalist by telephone, requesting clarification on one of the questions (relating to the number of parliamentarians to hold their seat longer than 10 years). Kizilkaya clarified the question, for which the official thanked him, assuring him they would return as soon as possible with the information. On 17 June (after the survey period had elapsed), the *Hürriyet* received a letter from Parliament, dated 2 June, containing answers to the questions.

The Justice Ministry did not provide the *Hürriyet* with any feedback during the week of the project. On 16 June, however, Kizilkaya received an email containing the information.

The prime minister's office was the worst performer. Kizilkaya could ascertain that they had received his questions, through an online interface which stated that the matter was "being evaluated." However, by the date of publication of this project, *Hürriyet* had still to receive an answer.

*

IPI sent emails to all three government offices requesting a comment on the results of the survey, but had received no reply by the date of finalisation of this report.

*

Points Earned	
Prime Minister	0
Justice Ministry	0
Parliament	0
Total Points = 0 (12th place)	

United Kingdom

Capital: London
Population: 61 million
Government Type: Parliamentary Democracy

Final Ranking out of 12:

6th

Media in the UK operate in a free environment, although concerns have arisen recently about the use of “super-injunctions” to muzzle the media, and the trend towards “libel tourism”, whereby foreign plaintiffs pursue civil defamation cases through sympathetic British courts.

Survey conducted with the help of

The Guardian

Results:

Katy Stoddard, the *Guardian* researcher assisting IPI with the survey, called the prime minister’s press office on the morning of Monday, 6 July for information on his salary and the costs incurred during state visits in 2008. A press officer advised her to email a Freedom of Information request for the details concerning travel costs, which she did immediately. She followed this up with a second email 24 hours later. Receiving no reply to either, Stoddard called the press office again on the morning of Wednesday, 8 July. This time an officer told her that the information would not be available until the end of the parliamentary session. By the end of the week, she had received no reply to her Freedom of Information emails. (A reply arrived on 3 August, directing her to a cabinet website).

With regards to the prime minister’s salary, a press officer at the prime minister’s press office gave her the information on her second prompt, 24 hours after her initial call.

The Justice Ministry performed better. Stoddard called with the two questions at around 10.30 am on Monday, 6 July and the ministry returned her call less than three hours later with the number of bills introduced to Parliament and telling her that details of the minister’s salary were available only through the Cabinet Office, which she in turn contacted. Again receiving no call back, Stoddard called the Cabinet Office a second time on Tuesday morning and received the answer immediately from the officer answering the phone.

The House of Commons Information Office reacted well. Stoddard called with the questions at 10:26 a.m. and received the answer regarding parliamentarians’ salaries while on the phone. Regarding the trickier question of the number of MPs who have held their seat for over 10 years, an information officer emailed the *Guardian* researcher some 45 minutes after her first telephone call with the answer (422) and a complete list of names.

*

Points Earned	
Prime Minister	5
Justice Ministry	30
House of Commons	40
Total = 75pts (6 th place)	

United States

Capital: Washington, D.C.
Population: 308 million
Government Type: Federal Republic

Final Ranking out of 12:

7th

The freedom of the US media is enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution and has been upheld repeatedly by the courts. Criticism has been levelled at the US in recent times though, for not maintaining these freedoms in conflict zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

Survey conducted with the help of

**missouri school of
Journalism**

Results:

The University of Missouri Journalism School's Sarah D. Wire began the survey on Monday, 22 June, placing a call to the White House. Although the U.S. president's salary is codified in law and takes an act of Congress to be changed, the White House was unable to give her an answer, directing her instead to the National Archives. Here she received an answer shortly after her first prompting telephone call the following Tuesday morning.

Regarding presidential expenses on state visits in 2008, the recent change in administration meant that the new White House staff was unable to assist. Redirected to the former president's national library, then to the National Archives and then to the State Department, Wire did not receive an answer to this question.

The attorney general's press officer asked Wire to make her requests via email, which she in turn did. She sent email prompts later that day and the following morning and received satisfactory answers to her questions at around 5 p.m. later that day.

With regards to the U.S. Congress, Wire put her requests to both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Information regarding salaries was available on each chamber's website. For an answer to the second question, Wire contacted the historians of each chamber. Directed to a relevant website for the House of Representatives, she was able to compile the answer from the information there. The Office of Senate History was able to provide the answer (50) on the spot.

*

Points Earned	
White House	10
Attorney General	10
US Congress	40
Total Points = 60 (7th place)	

Yemen

Capital: Sana'a
Population: 24 million
Government Type: Republic

Final Ranking out of 12:

12th

Yemen has a bad press freedom record. This year, the Yemeni information minister banned the publication of several newspapers on dubious grounds, and blocked access to news websites. Opposition journalists have been kidnapped, and a detained journalist was allegedly tortured.

Survey conducted with the help of



Results:

In line with the current press freedom climate in the country, the Yemeni government performed predictably bad in the survey, returning no answers to any of the questions sent to them during the project timeframe, and therefore scoring zero points.

The *Yemen Times* researchers made telephone calls, sent faxes and made multiple prompts to the government offices that were the subject of the survey. However, they were greeted with unanswered telephones or unfulfilled promises to call back.

At times they were even blocked explicitly by governments officials, with one officer at Parliament telling them that, as they were a “national and international newspaper read in Yemen and abroad and will cause trouble,” he could not give them the information to publish.

After 10 days of trying to get answers from the prime minister’s office, the manager finally refused outright to answer any questions. The Parliament did eventually answer the *Yemen Times*, although after the survey period had elapsed, and partial answers were also eventually obtained from the Justice Ministry.

*

IPI attempted to contact the Yemeni government for a comment on these results, via the email contact point on its Parliament website. However, the email was blocked, apparently because IPI did not “have permission to access” the Parliament contact point on the server.

*

Points Earned	
Head of Government Press Office	0
Justice Ministry	0
Parliament	0
Total Points = 0 (12th place)	

Conclusion

Although the procedure employed in IPI's "Accessing Governments" pilot project means that the ranking can only be considered a comparative assessment of the government press offices' performance in the exact week of the survey, such 'spot checks' as the ones IPI conducted do offer an indication of the larger problems journalists face trying to access government information in the countries assessed.

The huge gap in performance between the first nine countries and **Turkey, Yemen** and **Kenya** – where the participating journalists were unable to gather any information from the offices they contacted within the survey week – demonstrates the clear difficulty reporters there could face while writing about the government. The results shown in this report should be a cause of concern within those press offices contacted, and IPI urges these governments to scrutinise and, if necessary, introduce the necessary infrastructure for providing timely and accurate information.

It is also interesting to note that Parliament press offices, in many cases, outperformed the 'smaller' government offices in their respective countries. A possible explanation for this is that Parliament information officers are more accustomed to dealing with information requests in a non-partisan manner; but whatever the case may be, the press bureaus at ministries should take note. Of particular concern here is **Argentina**, whose performance would have equalled the three countries mentioned above in poorness were it not for the availability on the internet of certain information about members of Parliament.