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# Preface

IMPACS' Media and Elections Handbook, produced by the Media and Elections Response Centre, is the result of ongoing thinking about the seminal role that professional training for media organizations and reporters can play in emerging democracies. There is an underlying assumption present in newsrooms in both northern and southern societies that if journalists have general reporting skills, then reporting elections is much like reporting anything else.

We have come to believe that this is simply not the case.

There are issues particular to the reporting of elections. Elections are a flashpoint for media issues. This is when the relationships between reporters, governments and civil society actors come into sharper focus, and potentially, conflict. There are specific tools and information that can aid reporters and elections management bodies in providing citizens with the best information possible to make informed decisions at the polls.

This guide, the work of many hands, is a clearinghouse of some of these tools. It is intended for new reporters in all societies, as well as experienced reporters looking to brush up on their elections reporting skills. It is written in plain language to aid readers with English as a second language and to increase the ease of translation.

IMPACS would like to acknowledge the Human Security Program of the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade for the support received in the ongoing implementation of the Media and Elections Response Centre.

The contribution of International Media Support (IMS) to the production of this handbook, as well as to the continued refinement and practical realization of media and conflict activities, are also acknowledged. Experience clearly shows that elections can be both a key point in conflict resolution and trigger for conflict escalation. In this regard, it is crucial that elections are free and fair if they are to strengthen democratic processes and negate the causes and consequences of conflict. IMS, with its mandate to enhance peace, stability and democracy in conflict and conflict-threatened areas through rapid assistance to the media, has therefore sought to actively address the role of the media in contributing to free and fair election processes.

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Additional thanks are also given to our numerous readers, our author -Ross Howard, editor -Amanda Gibbs, and proofreader -Sarah McPherson, as well as to the many trainers and staff who have contributed their thinking and expertise to our Centre.

Shauna Sylvester  
Executive Director  
IMPACS

Jesper Holberg  
Executive Director  
International Media Support

For many people, an election is a crucial decision about the future. If the election goes well, the country can continue towards democracy and peace. But if the election goes badly, it can undermine democracy and turn the country back towards conflict. In this modern age, the media is one of the most powerful influences on how an election runs inside the country, and how it is perceived from outside.

## INTRODUCTION

For an election to go well, it must be free and fair.

There must be free speech so all citizens and all political candidates can speak without fear. The media must be free to tell everyone what was said without pressure to twist the truth. That is the job of professional journalists – to fully inform citizens of the issues and their choices so they can decide for themselves for whom to vote.

Also, the election must be fair. There must be rules to ensure every citizen has a secret vote. All candidates must have equal rights and opportunities to campaign without interference. The rules must be enforced fairly and everyone must respect the results of the vote.

Elections are a great challenge for the media. Journalists need to know the election rules. They must report fairly on all candidates, parties and issues. The media should be the voice of the voters. Journalists must adhere to professional standards of accuracy, impartiality and responsibility. And they have to work amidst great excitement, under pressure from powerful interests, and with very little time.

This handbook offers journalists basic preparation for meeting these challenges. It is designed for countries where democracy is fragile or a new idea. Every country has different election rules and campaign issues, but there are some worldwide standards for an election to be considered free and fair. There are rights and responsibilities every professional journalist should know. There are also skills journalists can use to help voters become better informed. That is the intention of this handbook – to help journalists enable the people to decide.

This handbook owes much to the following resources: Ian Porter's IMPACS curriculum for election reporting in Cambodia; the report of the 2001 IMPACS Media and Election Roundtable; Lisa Schnellinger's *Free & Fair: A Journalist's Guide to Improved Election Reporting in Emerging Democracies* for the International Centre for Journalists; the International Federation of Journalists' *Election Reporting Handbook*; the Administration and Cost of Elections (ACE) Project; the Institute of War and Peace Reporting; and the pioneering work of IMPACS and International Media Support. Great thanks are also due to Richard Carver of Oxford Media Research, Kim Kierans of King's College School of Journalism, Ian Porter, and Chris Waddell of Carleton University School of Journalism, for their wise advice. Thanks to editor Amanda Gibbs for shepherding this project. Thanks are also due to the journalists of Cambodia and Rwanda who asked the right questions and offered new insights into reporting on elections. Any errors or omissions will be corrected in future editions.

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# DEMOCRACY AND THE MEDIA

## Four Essential Conditions

Democratic government is not perfect. But to most people who have it, a democratic government seems better than the alternatives. Democracy is popular because it means the people make the important decisions through elections that are free and fair, and the government respects those decisions. In a free and fair election the people can choose political representatives who best stand for the voters' needs. Through the election process, the people choose which politician and political party they trust to speak up for them, and to deliver what the people want if the party becomes the government. In a democratic election, everyone has an equal right to elect or reject the government. This right is reflected in Article 21 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It states everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression without interference, including the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media, regardless of frontiers.

**But for an election to be democratic, and to represent the true wishes of the people, it must meet certain conditions. Some of the most important features are<sup>1</sup>:**

1

There must be a real choice for voters among the political parties and candidates. If there is only one significant party seeking election, there will be no debate or exchange of ideas and competing visions for the country. And when the party is elected it will have no reason to listen to the people because the people will have nowhere else to turn.

2

The competing political parties must have freedom to campaign in the election, which means freedom to hold meetings and to communicate with voters (whether by meetings, pamphlets, or advertising) about their policies. If parties and candidates cannot speak, then new ideas and solutions will never be heard, even if they are better than the existing ones of the government in power.

3

There must be rules in place that govern the election. These rules must be known and respected by all participants and available to everyone. There should be a respected individual or organization to administer the rules. The rules and administration of the election should be supervised by the courts to ensure complaints are handled fairly. The rules should include strong legal procedures to protect against corruption or violence that may occur when people register to vote, go to a political meeting or cast their votes on election day. No one should be able to tell voters who to vote for. If the people do not have these protections, then the election result may be dishonest and people will feel cheated. People may express their dissatisfaction in protest or try to establish a different kind of government. But if the people can see that the election is honest, it will have transparency, and there will be more trust in the elected government.

4

Most important of all, the people must know about their choices of who to vote for, how to vote and why it is important. The voters must have the opportunity to become well-informed and interested in the election through the provision of non-partisan information, or they can be deceived by special interests who win the election and do what they want with the resources of the country.

**If these four requirements are met, then the elected government may be said to have legitimacy. It means that the people accept that the winning party has the right to be the government and to make decisions affecting everyone. It also means other countries of the world will recognize the government's power.**



## No Free Press = No Democracy

It is very difficult to achieve these four requirements of a democratic election without a free press that operates with professionalism.

The media is usually the most important way people find out about the election and the political choices. The media needs to be free to report fairly on the campaigns of all the political parties so people can determine if there are differences between them. The media needs to provide all the people with the same information on how to vote. And the media needs the freedom to ask questions and get answers about the transparency of the election, and to tell voters if there is something wrong so that it can be fixed.

The media needs to hold both the government and opposition parties to account for how they have acted in the previous term. The people need to know how well the government has run the country since the last election, and what alternatives the opposition parties presented during that time. Did the government build all the bridges and schools it promised? Did rural communities get the clean drinking water they needed? Did the government listen to good ideas from the opposition parties, from women, and minorities? And when we say government, we also mean the elected politicians and all hired or appointed officials: the police, the army, the people who run the cities and provinces, schools and hospitals. Journalists need to ask these questions, and to report how the political parties answer them.

For all of these reasons, it can be said that democracy and a free media have a special relationship. They need each other. A free media will help keep the election honest and democratic. And a democratically elected government will protect the media's freedoms.

**Freedom is when the people can speak.  
Democracy is when the government listens.  
The media is the messenger.**



# THREE ELEMENTS OF AN ELECTION

**During the campaign period preceding the voting day, the media has at least three important subjects to report on, including:**

**1**

## **The political parties and candidates**

Most candidates who share the same ideas about how to serve the people, and are loyal to a particular leader, will belong to one political party. If elected by a majority of all the voters in the country, the party leader becomes the government leader, or president. Or the party that wins the most votes and members becomes the government and its leader becomes the prime minister or government leader.

There can be several or even a large number of political parties trying to win the election. Some parties will not have candidates in every part of the country. But the media should provide voters with some information about every party. Some candidates will not belong to any party but they still want to be elected to serve the people. These are called Independent Candidates.

**2**

## **The issues**

Each political party will have its own views about what is most important, what the party promises to do and why voters should elect that party. These views are called the party policies or party platform or party manifesto. There may also be issues that the people believe are important but that some politicians do not want to talk about. Or there could be statements some political candidates make that create controversy. A professional media will report these issues and ask the political parties to respond.

**3**

## **The voting process**

Information about the election rules and processes are necessary to assist people in participating. This information includes defining how voters can register; the length of the campaign; who will count the votes; how much money parties can spend on their campaigns; rules on advertising and media coverage; and who will impose penalties on parties or the media who violate the rules. The media must watch the process to see how well or if the rules are followed without corruption or favouritism to any one party, or abuse of any group of voters.

**But before we consider how to tell the people about the election campaign, we have to confirm our skills as professional journalists.**

# GOOD JOURNALISM IN ELECTION REPORTING

For citizens to make well-informed decisions in an election there must be a free media. But the media must be more than free. It must be reliable. It must be trusted. It must have opportunity to form independent and diverse views. Around the world, journalists have developed principles and standards to show how they will provide news people can trust. Unfortunately, there are places where journalists have to work under standards that are imposed by governments or powerful interests that interfere with professionalism. But wherever journalists come together freely to consider what they do, and how to guide themselves, they refer to their professional standards.

There are more than 150 professional journalists' associations and media organizations in countries around the world with codes of conduct or standards for good journalism. Most of them are similar, and can be found at [www.uta.fi/ethicnet](http://www.uta.fi/ethicnet). Every journalist should read the section on ethics on the website of the International Federation of Journalists. Consult <http://www.ifj.org> and see Quality in Journalism.

# What good journalism should include<sup>2</sup>

## 1

### Accuracy

Getting the correct information is the most important part of good journalism. Everything that is reported must be described accurately – the spelling of the candidates' names, the words they use and the precise numbers and descriptions of people, places and things. Candidates and voters can be emotional during elections. Their words must be reported carefully to accurately reveal their meaning, and to explain the context without exaggerating partial meanings.

In the news business, reporters will rush to get it first. But their greater priority is to first get it right. Voters will not talk to journalists if they fear journalists will not report their words accurately, or will not describe things as they really are.

## 2

### Impartiality (Fair Balance)

Almost every code of good journalism puts importance on impartiality, or on not taking sides. To achieve impartiality, a good journalist will seek to produce a report that is balanced. To be balanced is to include both sides. When one political candidate makes an accusation or a promise in an election campaign speech, a professional reporter will seek reaction from other candidates and include it in the report to create a balanced story. Looking for more than one opinion helps overcome the appearance of bias or favouring only one side. But the balanced report must also be fair. It may give more emphasis or more attention to one candidate over another in a news story because of the significance of the candidate's words or actions at that event, or at that time. At some other time, in some other story, the balance may change to fairly represent the significance of some other side. It requires more work to achieve a fair balance in every story, but it is essential in professional journalism. There are always at least two sides to every story.

Even if they work for one media that supports one party, professional journalists try to be unbiased and include balance in their reporting. Even if they

work for the state or government media, their stories should include news about the opposition parties. This is balance. As much as possible, the balance should be fair. Private media owners and state media should keep political comments and opinions separate from the news.

Many voters will not talk to reporters whom they fear will only report one party's views. Voters who distrust reporters will say what they think the reporter wants to hear, but they will not always say the truth.

There is another meaning to impartiality. Impartiality also means that the professional reporter is not a leader in any political group or movement. If a journalist is known as a leading activist, his or her reports will be considered biased and not credible even if they do have fair balance. A journalist's impartiality means that a reporter must not take an active role in any election as a campaigner, offer financial or other support to a party or take gifts from a party.

## 3

### Responsibility

Journalists have obligations to the people they report about, and to the society to whom they report the news. Journalists have a responsibility to protect their sources when their sources cannot be named. Many people will not tell journalists important news about political corruption if they fear their names will be revealed.

Responsible journalists also use only honest methods to obtain the news, which means their work should be guided by internationally accepted professional standards.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from International Standards, IWPR Training modules, IWPR.net

# Responsible Journalism Is Not:

## Defamatory

Good journalism does not repeat inaccurate allegations and insults or twist the truth about a person. Journalism can report allegations and offensive speech, but the story must be balanced so the allegation or offense is answered.

## Derivative

Good journalism does not simply repeat what has been reported somewhere without checking the facts. Copying others' news may just repeat false information.

## Malicious

Journalism is powerful. News reports can ruin politicians' reputations, put party members in danger, or cause public protest. Professional journalists do not misuse their power by twisting the news and using it as a personal weapon to deliberately harm anyone.

## Corrupt

Professional journalists do not accept bribes. Good journalism does no special favours for any politician or party. Good journalism is not for sale. Whenever possible, the media should pay its own way.

These are the basic standards which produce journalism people can trust. It is called professional or reliable journalism. All reliable reporting should be accurate, impartial and responsible. This applies to everyone involved in producing the news – assigning stories, editing copy or sound bites, writing headlines, directing, producing, or managing newsrooms. Any election story that contains information that cannot be verified or is not reliable should not be published or broadcast.

**At any time, good reporters ask themselves: does my work meet the test of reliable journalism? Is my election report accurate, impartial and responsible?**

# Reliable Journalism And Democracy

Reliable reporting earns journalism a privileged place in many countries' constitutions and laws. Through the media, the people can exercise their right to free speech guaranteed in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Especially during an election campaign, reliable journalism enables citizens to make well-informed voting decisions. But the media must be more than reliable. It needs two other essential conditions for the election reporting to be free and fair.

## Diverse and independent

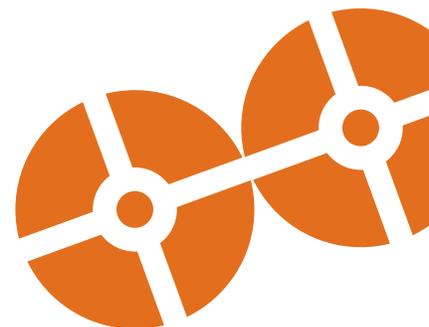
There must be a choice of parties in a democratic election. There should also be a diversity of media to report on the campaign. No single media outlet, such as the state media, can do enough. Competition between several different media outlets ensures that the opinions of competing parties and different voters are fully brought to public attention.

Also, the media must be independent. The media must be free of interference from government or other powerful interests that block the news reporting of other parties' voices and the public's opinion. A number of radio stations, each one controlled by

different interests and reporting only news that favours those interests, is a form of diversity. But this diversity does not represent independence. It is not reliable journalism. The state media should be a voice for all the political parties and for the people, and not just the voice of the government party. The state media does not belong to one party. It is a service for the people.

An independent media must be supported by laws and courts and independent regulators who protect the media from interference. In an election campaign, the election commission or a special independent commission should establish and enforce guidelines for free and fair reporting and to monitor the media for reliability.

**Good journalism is like good medicine. Its values should not be political, cultural or racial. It helps support the good health of democracy.**



# THE ELECTION PROCESS

An election is one of the biggest events in peacetime. It involves large numbers of people with official responsibilities in supervising the campaign process and election day voting, and many more people working voluntarily for the political parties. Election campaigns create strong feelings with many people looking at what can go wrong and blaming each other. For this reason, an election must follow clear rules and procedures to avoid mistakes or corruption. The laws of the country must support and enforce these rules fairly. The media must have instructions on how it reports the election to ensure that it is free and fair. These are some of the most important elements of the election process<sup>3</sup>:

## The Election Laws

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**A free and fair election requires the state to pass laws that guarantee:**

- Each and every citizen has the right to participate as a voter and as a candidate no matter what his or her class, caste, gender or religion.
- Elections take place at regular intervals, so the people can review or change their choice of governing party.
- The voting procedure gives everyone the right to a vote that is secret and will be accurately counted.
- The operation of the election is controlled by an election management commission that is independent of politicians and the government. Members of the commission should not belong to any political party and should be trustworthy members of the community. Anyone should be able to complain to the commission about election irregularities. The commission should act quickly and fairly and everyone should respect its decisions.

<sup>3</sup> ACE Project

# The Election Commission

The election commission faces an enormous task: to allow the parties and candidates to communicate their policies to the voters without unfair advantage or breaking any laws. The commission creates rules or a code of conduct on how to campaign, and how to keep the campaign peaceful. The rules for campaign practices can be very extensive, including how long to campaign; where candidates can put up their signs and flags; what money they can spend; what advertising is permitted; prohibitions against paying or threatening voters; and rules against soldiers and policemen campaigning for any party while they are on duty. All of these rules should be made available to the media and the public.

The commission must appoint and train election officials to register voters, to make safe places for voting, and to protect and count the ballots honestly. The commission must also raise awareness among the people about the election, the names of all the

political candidates, and how to vote. Everything the commission does must be impartial and not favour any party or candidate.

The media should examine the election commission, considering if it is fully equipped to do its job and if it will be respected as honest. Because the media is a major source of information for voters, the election commission also may make rules involving media reporting of the election to ensure the election is free and fair. The commission may make rules concerning advertising by the parties. The election commission rules should be enforced by the courts if necessary. There should be the same election reporting rules for both the state-owned media and the private media.

**The election commission should be a model of transparency. The election commission activities and decisions should be open to the media.**

# The Media As Election Watchdog

There may be pressure on the election commission from political or other powerful interests. The parties may try to do everything to win the election. It will be difficult for the election commission to catch every trick and abuse that may occur. But the election must be fair and honest if it is to have legitimacy with the people and the world.

That is why a reliable media is needed as a watchdog against corruption and illegal activity in the election. It is the role of the media to report problems and possible violations of the rules, as well as to inform voters about the issues and the political parties and candidates' policies. The media does not work for the commission or the political parties, but the media can shine its own spotlight on the election process and expose corruption or other illegal activities. The commission and the parties know there will be public criticism of the commission and the parties if the abuse is not stopped.

Reporters need to be well aware of the election rules, how the election commission operates and how the voting will be conducted.

Also, there should be a policy and practice of equitable or fair news reporting about the political parties. This means all parties receive some amount of

news reports about them, but the amount of reporting about each party should reflect the significance of the party in previous elections, as well as their significance in the current campaign. One good indicator is the number of candidates. Bigger parties will receive more coverage. This is a policy that the news media should practice as part of reliable journalism. But the election commission may make rules to require the news media to do this, during the election campaign period.

The commission may also require the news media to provide equitable or fair amounts of free advertising or free airtime for each political party.

State media should accept all parties' advertising. Private media have a public responsibility. Private media should provide equitable or fair news reports on all parties as defined by the election commission, and should treat all parties' advertising the same.

When the election commission advertises in the media to inform voters about election procedures, it should advertise in all media.

Reporters should not show any political preference in their news reports. Their news reports should be accurate, impartial and responsible.

# What To Watch For<sup>4</sup>

There are many ways that elections can go wrong, or can be corrupted. But these are some of the most important things for the media to be aware of and to report on as the watchdog of the campaign and election process for voters:

## Voters' rights

- Are all eligible citizens on the voters list or registered to vote?
- Are all voters free to hear and discuss the parties and issues without fear?
- Do parties threaten voters or election officials or tell voters for whom to vote?
- Do parties or officials try to bribe voters with money, large gifts, or promises of jobs?
- Do voters understand their role and the importance of voting, and do they know their choices?
- Do women and minorities feel safe in voting?

## Candidates' and party rights

- Are all qualified parties and candidates allowed to run in the election?
- Are candidates representing minorities, regions and different political opinions all allowed to seek election?
- Are all parties able to hold public meetings without fear?
- Are the election rules and limits applied equally to all parties?
- Are the police and army protecting all parties as they campaign, distribute information and hold public meetings?
- Are any powerful interests spending large amounts of money to support one particular party?
- Are the parties willing to disclose where they get their money?
- Are government officials neutral and not using government money or resources such as vehicles to favour one party?
- Is the political party that is in government making many announcements of new projects just when the election campaign begins? This is unfair to the opposition parties who cannot use government money this way.

## The election process

- Are the voters' lists complete?
- Are voters left off the lists able to get on the list by showing proper identification?
- Are the ballots easily understood by voters who cannot read?
- Do voters easily understand the voting instructions?
- Are there enough ballots, ballot boxes, and officials to observe the voting and count the ballots?
- Are there security arrangements to protect people going to vote?
- Are there security arrangements to protect the ballot boxes so nobody can stuff them with false ballots?
- Is the election commission seen as impartial, independent and honest?
- Are there international and independent observers who are monitoring the election, and how do they see the election commission?
- Does the election commission respond quickly to complaints from the media, the voters and the political parties about all alleged violations of the election laws?
- Does the election commission investigate and stop violations of the election law? Are violators penalized in any way?
- Are the media, non-governmental organizations and international observers able to monitor and report to the public about the election process without interference or fear?
- Is the state media providing reliable coverage of all the candidates and parties? Is the coverage accurate, impartial, responsible, and fair?
- Does the private media – newspapers, radio and television – provide reliable and fair reporting?
- Does the private media treat all parties' advertising equally?

<sup>4</sup>Lisa Schnellinger

# CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES

The most important role of the media in an election campaign is to allow voters to be well-informed about their choices. Another role is to observe whether the election is free and fair. A third role for the media is to report on the strategies the parties are using to try to win votes. Voters deserve to know if a party is making different promises to different people. Voters need to know about party leaders but also party policy and the party's past record<sup>5</sup>.



<sup>5</sup> Ian Porter

Most parties make their leader the centre of the campaign. The leader tries to be popular with everyone, so that the voters who like the leader will also vote for the party's local candidates. The parties and the leader also choose the issues and policies they think will attract the most voters. Each party wants the media to focus attention on its leader and policies, and to ignore the others.

## Party Strategies

### Core vote

One essential strategy of a party is to win the votes of people who supported the party in the past. This traditional support is called the party's political base or core vote. The party's base may be from a region that likes the party because it has defended its interests. Or the party may be a long-time supporter of the interests of farmers or working people.

During a campaign, reporters need to consider how well a party is attracting its base support. Is the party well-organized? Did it encourage supporters to register to vote? Does the party leader spend much time speaking only to the base support? Is the party losing its base support? What do voters in the base support say about this?

### Undecided voters

In many elections, a party cannot win with only its core vote. The party must also attract the votes of people who are undecided. Undecided voters may be young people who are voting for the first time. This can be a very large group. Undecided voters can also include people who are no longer satisfied and loyal to their old party and want a change.

In some democracies, parties send campaign volunteers to every house to ask for the support of undecided voters. The parties also send letters and printed material to undecided voters, and put advertising in the media. This work takes many volunteers and is expensive. And sending volunteers and letters to ask for voters' support can frighten some voters. This outreach may not be possible in many countries where many people live far away in the countryside, or cannot read. In some countries, the parties rely on village chiefs, or prominent people over whom they have control, to tell the local people how to vote. It is illegal if the chief or local official uses threats or bribes to direct the vote. Everyone should have the freedom to personally decide for whom to vote.

To overcome traditional loyalties and the influence of local officials, political parties everywhere turn to the media to get their message directly to the voters. The media reporting and the advertising – especially radio and also now television – have become very important to election campaigns.



The objective of a political party's media strategy is to influence people to vote for the candidate because of what they see, hear and read about the candidate in the media. This media strategy is especially aimed at undecided or dissatisfied voters who may not pay much attention to politics most of the time. Journalists need to understand what the parties are trying to do through the media.

## Media Strategies



Political parties use their leader to show the best positive public image of the party. They want voters to have a good emotional reaction to the image of the leader. They hire experts to tell the leader how to give good speeches, how to dress, how to look friendly, and to never get angry in public. They show pictures in the campaign signs and advertisements, which make the leader look attractive to voters.

The party knows many people believe what they see and hear in the news media. The party tries to create soft news. Soft news makes the candidate look appealing by showing the candidate visiting voters in their homes, kissing babies, and greeting crowds of enthusiastic voters. The party will also hold news conferences during which the leader presents policies or promises and attacks other candidates and parties' policies. The parties may not want their leader seen directly debating with another leader. Often the leaders will only give interviews to newspapers or on radio and television that supports their party.

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This news manipulation is a difficult challenge for reporters. Professional journalists want leaders to address the problems the community is talking about, or to give the voters differences between their promises and those of other leaders. Journalists cannot ignore soft news and press conferences because other media will report it. But professional journalists can insist on asking tough questions, instead of letting political leaders say only things that make them look good. And reporters also must seek balance by asking other leaders and affected voters to comment on what was said in a press conference or speech. It requires courage to ask questions. Reporters should be polite and respectful. It takes more time and work to produce a report that is balanced. But professional journalists always seek to include all sides.

**A reporter's best protection against criticism is to be able to show that the story is fairly balanced and the reporter is personally impartial.**

# COVERING CAMPAIGNS

Most election campaigns are composed of many speeches, party rallies and press conferences. At these events journalists should not just repeat all the words of the political candidate. They should also report details of where the speech was given, what was the reaction of the ordinary people, what did political opponents say later, and how this speech may affect the election. As professional journalists, we are not just repeaters or stenographers. We are reporters. We include other important information in our news stories<sup>6</sup>.



<sup>6</sup> Ian Porter

Usually a campaign speech tries to do several things:

- **It reminds people why they have supported the party in the past.**
- **It describes the big issues in words that favour the policies of the party.**
- **It says the other parties cannot solve the country's problems.**
- **It makes promises that will motivate people to vote for the party.**

## The Speech

In their speeches, politicians may inflame people's emotions with violent language and attacks on their opponents. Professional journalists do not censor what is said. Comments should be reported accurately. But it is especially important to balance inflammatory language with the opposing view by those who are being attacked. A balanced story will reduce the danger voters are misinformed or encouraged to act without hearing both sides.

A professional journalist makes no personal criticism of what a political candidate says. The journalist reports it accurately, and seeks someone else's opinion for balance. But it is a journalist's responsibility to report if the candidate is saying different things to different groups, or if the candidate is saying something different than last week. Or if other candidates in the same party are saying different things.

Usually the speech will be interrupted by cheering and clapping, by people who like the leader. Journalists do not cheer or clap because they must be seen to be impartial.

The words of the speech are not the only element of the news story. Readers and audiences also deserve to know:

- **How large is the crowd? Do not rely on the party officials' count. Who was there? How far did they come? What part of the speech did they like the most?**
- **What is the reaction of individual listeners in the audience? What do they say about the speech? What do people outside on the street say?**
- **What is the reaction of other party leaders or candidates to the speech?**
- **Was there evidence of organized disruption? If so, by whom?**

In some countries another big part of covering election campaigns involves reporting on opinion polls. Polls can be sophisticated ways of discovering what opinions the people have about the election and how many people hold the same opinion. Political parties use opinion polls to find out what people think about their issues and leaders in the election campaign. Sometimes parties change their policies and their leaders' words in response to the findings of polls. Political parties will also claim that their leader is very popular and urge other people to support the leader. Polls can influence how people vote because people like to know what their neighbours are thinking and may decide to vote the same way.

Opinion polls can make exciting news about an election campaign by showing the political party leaders in a race to be elected. But polls only present a brief picture of people's opinion at the time when they were asked. People's opinions could change in a few days if they learn new information. Opinion polls can get too much attention and may influence voters too easily.

## Popularity And Opinion Polls

**Journalists must exercise great care and seek professional advice in reporting opinion polls. Opinion polls are open to manipulation by political parties and powerful interests. Journalists need to ask several questions<sup>7</sup> before reporting opinion polls, including:**

- Who conducted and paid for the polls? Was it an independent and professional polling company? If the poll was conducted by a political party the questions may be biased and designed to mislead voters. It should not be reported as news without comparison to other polls.
- How many people were questioned for the poll? How were they selected? If the number of people is too small then the survey of opinions will not be representative of a large number of people. Good polls involve opinions of 400 to 2,500 people or more.
- What questions were asked and how were they asked? Can a reporter get a copy of the questionnaire in order to see the order in which questions were posed?
- When was the poll conducted? What was going on in the campaign that might have influenced how people answered the poll?
- How do the results of this poll compare to other polls? A single poll is only a brief picture of attitudes. It might be biased or in error. It might be too old and not show how opinions have changed. It is always better to compare one poll with others, to look for consistency or trends.
- If the poll is conducted by a media organization, does that organization have a political bias? Will it influence and mislead voters?

**In some countries publishing the results of opinion polls is banned for a period of time before the election because of the danger that inaccurate or biased polls will mislead voters.**

<sup>7</sup> Media Monitoring, Project Zimbabwe 1998

# A NEW WAY: VOTERS-VOICE REPORTING

An election campaign places heavy demands upon journalists. The political parties try to create news and attract votes by giving speeches, conducting news conferences, making promises and attacking each other's policies and advertising.

But an election is not for the politicians. It is for the people<sup>8</sup>. It is the voters who make the most important decisions about whom to elect.

During an election there should be more journalism that gives a voice to what the ordinary people want and what they are saying. The political candidates should ideally respond to the voters' voice. And then the voters can decide. All this is done through the media. The people need voters'-voice reporting for the election to be free and fair.

Voters'-voice reporting should report on the people's agenda and not just on the policies and promises made by the candidates. To find this agenda, journalists need to think like the people, not like the politicians. People think about whether it is safe to vote. People want to know what their neighbours are thinking and what issues are important to their neighbours. People think about what the political parties will do about the neighbourhood problems. They want the media to ask the parties what they will do, and bring the answers back to the people.

Voters'-voice reporting is a source of news the political parties do not provide. It requires more work because more people must be interviewed, instead of just repeating the words of the candidates. But it is journalism people will trust, because they know it reflects their concerns. If people trust their media, they will also speak up for the media and defend it if the government or other interests try to silence good journalism.

<sup>8</sup> Porter

## Thinking Like A Voter

Thinking like a voter produces more stories to report. It produces questions to ask political candidates.

For example: what is the first thing a voter thinks about? Safety. The voter wants to know if there will be violence at the voting station. The voter wants to know if the vote will be truly secret. The voter wants to know who to complain to if there are threats.

These are questions that can be answered by news reports from local communities and across the country. The media can inform the voter about the voting rules. The media can interview police, the election commission, or victims of previous violence and ask them what is being done to ensure violence is prevented in this election. What are officials and party leaders doing about new violence? Are they investigating, can they stop it, are they trying to stop it?

The next thing a voter may want to know is what choices will he or she have when voting. What names will be on the ballot? The voters need to know the names of all candidates and some information about all the parties. The voters want to compare the main promises made by the political parties. A balanced story describing what the different parties promise to do about a particular issue in a community gives voters freedom to choose.

When we think like a voter we should also remember people want to know what their neighbours are thinking. A reporter can ask a number of people in one community to each answer the same question. This approach will give an idea about what the community is thinking. A reporter can ask voters “what is the most important problem which you want the government to fix?” or “what do you think about the violence in this election campaign?” This question could be asked of all the people eating in one restaurant, or all the people who walk across a bridge in one hour, or all the women waiting for a bus at one place. This technique of finding out what people in a community are thinking is called person-in-the-street research. If many people give the same answer to a person-in-the-street question, it is possibly typical of many other voters’ opinions, and it is an idea for a news story. Or if everyone has different answers, this too may be a story idea. However, it is only the beginning. The reporter needs more information and evidence, and may need to ask political candidates what their party will do to respond to the people’s concerns. This is voters’-voice reporting.

Reporters can also ask candidates what voters are telling them are the most important issues and compare that with what voters say.

**Voters deserve a voice in election stories. Political candidates should answer the questions raised by the voters’ voice.**

## Other Communities, Other Voices

There are also other people who have voices and opinions on the election. There are special communities of people who are united, not by where they live, but by what they do. This can be farmers, fishermen, market vendors, people who work for businesses or teachers. It may be the elderly, people who are land-mine victims, people who have lost children in recent conflicts, or perhaps people of one caste or tribe, among others. Some may have an important concern but they have no voice because they are poor, live in remote areas or are discriminated against. It is too easy to simply follow the political leaders and candidates and repeat their stories as news. It is just as important for the media to ensure the voices of special communities

are heard by other voters and politicians, because they have concerns the political candidates should address.

There are also expert voices who can provide well-informed opinions on the election issues and policies. These are people such as professors at universities, and people with special knowledge of concerns such as women’s rights, human rights, or workers’ rights and safety. They may be former elected officials or former administrators of elections. They can present new ideas for voters to think about and new ways for the media to see the election campaign.

# Examples of voters-voice reporting

1

TRADITIONAL ELECTION REPORTING	VOTERS-VOICE REPORTING
<p>ATU CITY, ANS – The leader of the National Party says he will win the election because his party is the real friend of the Atu people.</p> <p>He told citizens in Riverside Village that the opposition Union Party is not honest and keeps money belonging to the people.</p> <p>He said everyone knows the Union Party is made up of “liars and thieves who are not real Atu people”.</p> <p>The leader also said that if elected his government will build a car-making factory and create jobs for everyone.</p> <p>The leader also told voters to listen to the advice of their village chief and vote as he tells them to.</p> <p>The leader also praised his local candidates and also greeted students at....</p>	<p>ATU CITY, ANS – The leader of the Union Party has angrily denied an opposition party claim that the Union Party is stealing public funds.</p> <p>“Voters know me as an honest Atu man ready to lead the country,” said the Union Party leader, responding to accusations from the National Party.</p> <p>In a speech to 15 people in Riverside Village yesterday the National leader called Union Party members liars and thieves and not real Atu.</p> <p>The accusations and denials left some voters confused and worried their local concerns will be ignored.</p> <p>“I don’t know who to believe but I want them to talk about clean drinking water for my village,” said Mae Bea, a resident of Riverside Village yesterday.</p> <p>Village shopkeeper Can Dou agreed.</p>

**SEE THE DIFFERENCE?**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· The news is one-sided. It does not seek any reaction from the other party. It lacks balance.</li> <li>· The news is just the words of the leader’s speech without any other information or context.</li> <li>· The news has no voices of ordinary voters.</li> <li>· The news repeats the old tradition that voters should do as they are told instead of thinking for themselves.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· The news is more balanced. It reports both the accusation and the response.</li> <li>· The news includes important information such as how many people attended the National Leader’s speech.</li> <li>· The news shows ordinary voters giving their opinion about the two parties.</li> <li>· The news gives the voters in a local community a voice to express their concerns.</li> </ul> |
|--|--|

2

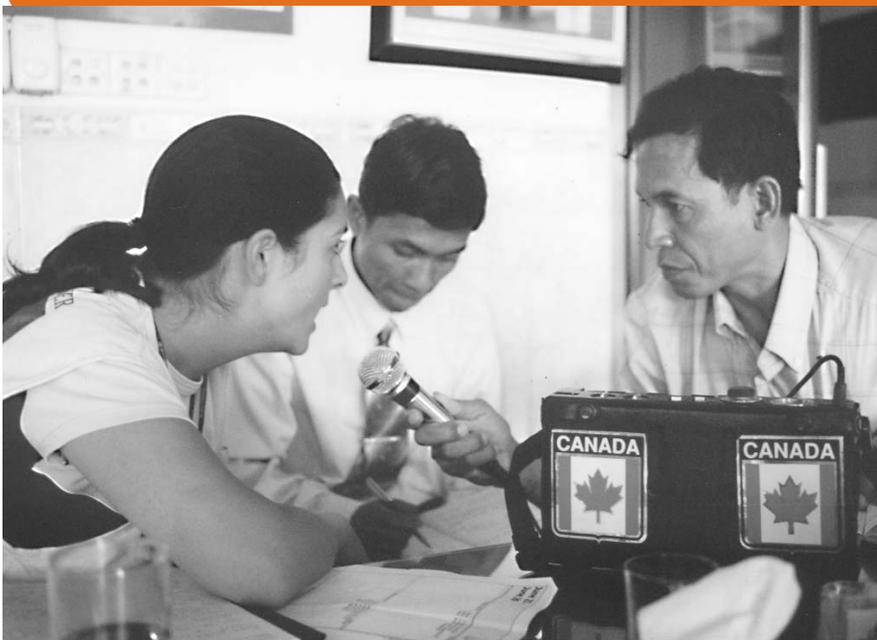
VOTERS-VOICE REPORTING	
<p>Hillside Village, ANS – In this tiny village many voters are waiting to hear the magic words before they decide how to vote.</p> <p>“The words I want to hear are ‘new bridge’,” says village shop-owner Can Dou this week. “Without a bridge I must walk three days to reach the main road and get to market.”</p> <p>Local health care worker Mae Bea agrees. “Village people get very sick because they cannot get to a doctor. Even the political leaders are slow to get here because there is no bridge.”</p> <p>Hillside Village is a very poor farming village of 1,500 Yoho People located 50 kilometres from Atu City. It is only one kilometer from the national highway but on the other side of a river which cannot be crossed by boat.</p>	<p>The National Party, Union Party and Patriot Party have election candidates here and have put up many signs. Only the Union Party policies say that a bridge should be built.</p> <p>One voter named Auld Thyme said her family cannot visit because there is no way to cross the river. “My neighbour says the Patriot Party candidate is a nice young man. But I do not know if he will get us a bridge.”</p> <p>Other voters interviewed here are worried about voting safety. They said the local Election Commission official is never available to advise them. The officer, Loung Term, said yesterday he has been ill.</p> <p>The names of the political candidates are....</p>

**SEE THE STYLE?**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· The story is about people of a typical community. It seeks the views of several voters and finds they all share the same concern about a new bridge. It presents their concerns to the political parties.</li> <li>· The story is fair. It includes the names of all the political parties with candidates seeking election.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· The news is balanced. It seeks a response from the Election Commission official who is criticized.</li> <li>· The story compares the policies of the political parties. Only one party wants a bridge.</li> <li>· The story is also about a special community of Yoho People. It treats their concerns with as much importance as any other community.</li> </ul> |
|--|--|

# INTERVIEWING POLITICIANS

Journalists are always asking questions to get information. But this practice is especially important during election campaigns when it may be necessary to interview a political leader and ask a number of tough questions. Good interviewing is all about asking the right questions.



# The Questions To Ask

The six basic questions a journalist should always ask to report any story are well known. They are:

**Who? What? When? Where? Why? And How?**

But when a reporter must question a political candidate, there are three good questions that produce better answers:

**What? How? And Why?**

For example: A reporter should ask: What will your party do about the lack of clean water in the village? What caused the shortage of clean water?

Why did the village get no clean water for the last four years? Why did it take so long for the government to bring water to the village?

How will your government help the people of Mountainside Village? How did it happen that this one village of Yoho People did not get a bridge?

Look at these questions very carefully. None of these questions can be answered just “yes” or “no.”

Every question that begins with what or why or how invites the person to give information. They invite the person to talk, instead of giving just a quick one-word answer. They are called open-ended questions.

These are the three key words to unlock information. Ask a politician or anyone a question beginning with what, how or why and they will tell you more.

**Other tips for interviews:**

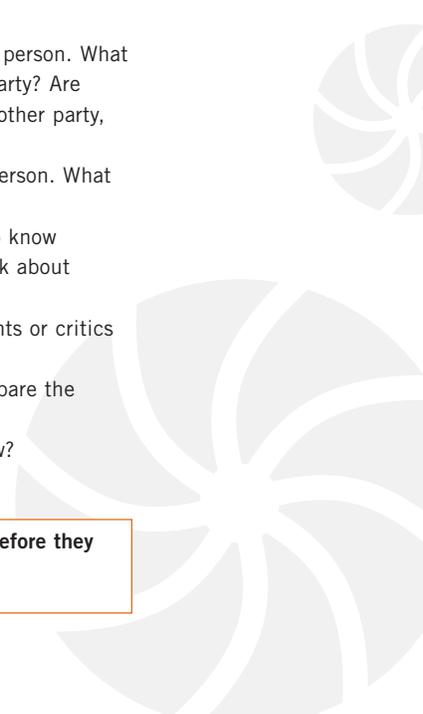
- Ask short questions. Do not ask questions that begin with a long statement. A smart politician might only respond to your statement and ignore your question.
- Do not offer a personal opinion in your question. A politician may discuss your opinion and ignore your question.
- Do not ask two or more questions in one. Politicians usually choose the easy question and ignore the tough one. A smart politician will only answer the easy question.
- Ask follow-up questions, or ask the same question another way to get a full answer.

# The Preparation

Before interviewing a political candidate or leader, it is important to gather as much information as possible in advance. This preparation will allow you to understand what is missing in the interview and to recognize when the politician is saying something different than in the past. It is necessary to do research.

- Find out why you are interviewing this person. What position does the person hold in the party? Are they the youngest, the oldest, from another party, or from another city or town?
- Find out the past experiences of the person. What have they said and done in the past?
- Find out what the community wants to know about this person. What do voters think about this person?
- Find out the views of political opponents or critics and experts.
- Develop specific questions to ask. Prepare the questions as open-ended questions.
- Remember to ask: What, Why and How?

**Journalists need to be well-informed before they ask a question.**



# MONITORING ELECTION REPORTING

The media's roles in an election are many. The media serves to inform the voters. The media is a watchdog to prevent corruption and large errors in the election. The media is the voters' voice.

There should also be monitors of the media, to ensure that the media meets its important responsibilities and that the election is free and fair. Voters want to know if they are well-informed by the media. The election commission needs to know that the media provides equitable and fair reporting for all parties. Political parties want the same assurance. International observers want to know that reporting is without interference by the government or powerful interests so that the election has legitimacy. All of this is called media monitoring. There needs to be an independent organization or independent officials to monitor the media.

Media monitoring must be done by respected and non-partisan persons or organizations with no personal gain or vested interest in who wins the election. Monitoring requires professional direction and trained persons to measure the accuracy, fairness and freedom of media coverage in an election. It can be done by a university or non-governmental organization or by an association of the media or a press council. Media monitoring can be paid for by the election commission or by other independent interests. There can be more than one organization doing media monitoring. But monitoring must be respected as non-partisan. Monitoring should cover all significant media, including regional media with a strong influence on voters' opinions. It should measure not just the number of stories each party, candidate or leader receives in the media, but also the accuracy and fairness of the stories. The monitoring should include measurements of the advertising, and how well it conforms to the election commission rules. The findings of the media monitoring, if possible, should be made public and reported in the media during the campaign as well as afterwards.



## Media accountability

The best kind of monitoring is supported and respected by all the major media, both state and private. This approach means the media organizations and individual journalists agree to a code of media conduct, and agree to be guided by the advice and the public reports of the monitoring organization. Using a code of conduct creates media accountability.

**The code of conduct includes definitions of:**

- equitable or fair amounts of reporting of all political parties
- fairness and balance of reporting, including respect for human rights
- reporting of opinion polls
- party access to free advertising on all state media
- treatment of women and of minorities in election reporting

To be accountable the media must be willing to publish or broadcast the reports of the monitoring commission and to correct mistakes discovered by the monitoring organization. The election commission can take the advice of the monitoring organization and direct the media, the government or the parties to correct mistakes or stop unfair reporting and advertising. Many countries have media codes. One example can be found at: [www.impacs.org/pdfs/mediacodeofconduct.pdf](http://www.impacs.org/pdfs/mediacodeofconduct.pdf).

Media monitoring is not a substitute for a system of laws and regulations, which would guarantee journalists' freedom from government interference, freedom of information, and media owners' freedom. The legal system should protect journalists from censorship, intimidation or arbitrary arrest. It should also protect citizens from media libel and slander, or malicious or irresponsible journalism. But the legal system itself must be honest and competent, and not be used by powerful interests to interfere with media freedom.

If journalists and the media cannot agree on a code of conduct for themselves, and respect it, there will be pressure from dissatisfied people for the government to impose a code that could be much worse. During elections, the election commission may create a code for media reporting on the election.

# CAMPAIGN SAFETY

Elections are supposed to be peaceful alternatives to resolving disagreements by violent conflict. But election campaigns can be emotional and dangerous events<sup>9</sup>. The media can become a target of attack by powerful interests opposed to a free and fair election. The media needs to be aware of safety measures. One source of advice is the IFJ's *Danger: Journalists at Work*. Another source is *The Practical Guide* by UNESCO and Reporters Sans Frontieres. The South African Union of Journalists also has a useful manual. Also see the International News Safety Institute at [www.newssafety.com](http://www.newssafety.com).

- Journalists' associations, media managers and owners should seek a declaration from all political parties and the government to respect and promote the physical safety of journalists. The public safety authorities must respect this declaration.
- Election reporters should know the election commission rules and understand journalists' rights and responsibilities.
- Journalists should never wear political colours, badges or slogans, and should not accept favours from political party workers or candidates.
- Journalists should always carry identification proving they work in the media.
- Journalists should never carry a weapon.
- Journalists have a right to refuse an assignment they consider too dangerous.
- Journalists should have a right to proper equipment and insurance in dangerous assignments.
- Journalists should report any attacks or threats against them to their employers. The media should report threats against journalists as news, and should demand the election commission protect journalists.
- Journalists should always tell someone else – their editor, their co-workers or their family – where they are going and when they will return.

**A journalist's best defence is reporting in a way that is accurate, impartial and responsible. The reporting should take no sides. It should represent the voice of the people.**

<sup>9</sup> IFJ Election Reporting Handbook

# ELECTION REPORTING: IS MY STORY COMPLETE?

Every journalist and editor should ask these questions before reporting election news.

- 1 Is this story accurate? Are the facts and names correct and do I believe the information is true? Have I made every effort to confirm the information is true?
- 2 Is this story impartial and balanced fairly? Does it include both sides or alternative views and does it present the news without giving any special favour to one party or candidate?
- 3 Is this responsible journalism? Was this news obtained without bribes or illegal actions and does it protect sources and not violate the election and press laws?
- 4 Is this story voter-focused? Does it have significant news for the voters? Does it present the concerns of voters to the politicians?
- 5 Is this the whole picture? Do these words, photographs, television clips or audio-tapes give a true picture of the most important thing that happened at the event?
- 6 Will this news story help to make the voters well-informed, so they can vote wisely, in their own best interest?
- 7 Is this election free and fair? Is there other news about this election that should be reported?

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For a comprehensive listing of media and elections resources and for more information about the IMPACS Elections Response Centre, please visit our website [www.impacs.org](http://www.impacs.org)

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- Page 26: A lineup at a polling station in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on national election day, July 27 2003. Photo: Kim Kierans.



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