

# International Federation of Journalists

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## Elections and the Role of the Media Background Documents

### I. Conditions for Free Election Reporting

#### 1. Legal Framework Guaranteeing Press Freedom

Before any election can be undertaken in a manner which will satisfy any international scrutiny it is necessary to ensure that legislation contrary to freedom of the press is repealed and obstacles to the free circulation of information are removed. Therefore, all laws which are in violation of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights should be identified and rescinded prior to the election process.

The legal framework in place should guarantee:

- access to information for all citizens;
- ban of censorship and seizure of media;
- protection of journalists' sources;
- no restrictions on establishment of publishing houses;
- pluralism through anti-monopoly rules governing media ownership, regulations ensuring transparency of media ownership;
- transparent and clear rules on allocation of broadcast licenses;
- laws ensuring the editorial and structural independence of publicly or state-owned media.

Governments should also ensure that laws on privacy and libel cannot be misused to silence the press. Especially at election time candidates tend to attack each other. In such cases, journalists reporting elections should have a degree of qualified privilege to protect them from prosecution. There have been cases where not the politician making the comment but the journalist reporting it has been prosecuted for libel. Such actions can only create obstacles to free election reporting. Generally, politicians must learn to be thick-skinned. They should accept that they can be subject to more direct criticism than other members of the public – in line with the decision of the European Court of Human Rights<sup>1</sup>.

#### 2. Editorial Independence

If the media are to fulfil the role of “public watchdog” those working in the media have to be allowed to work without being subject to undue influence from outside interests. The notion of editorial independence is at the core of anti-censorship regulations aimed

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<sup>1</sup> The European Court of Human Rights in the case of *Lingens v. Austria* held that “the limits of acceptable criticism are wider as regards a politician as such than as regards a private individual.”

to ensure that the media can research, investigate and publish without interference from the state.

While most countries publicly condemn censorship there are countless cases of governments trying to interfere with the publication of information critical of their performance. State-owned media is often subject to direct governmental interference: directors of news are replaced without explanation, journalists are sacked if their programmes do not find the approval of the authorities and an atmosphere of self-censorship prevails.

In some countries there are statutory provisions regulating editorial independence in state-owned media. In Romania for instance, the act on public service broadcasting states:

*“(Journalists) shall enjoy the rights and obligations inherent in the profession of journalism, as well as those provided for by the editorial statute, code of professional ethics and regulations governing the organisation and functions of each company.”*

Especially at election time provisions guaranteeing editorial independence need to be put into place. But it is also a matter of professionalism and confidence on the part of journalists to recognise and fight undue interference.

## **II. Guidelines for Government**

The following guidelines I believe provide a basic and initial text for governments in establishing an acceptable framework for election coverage.

### **GUIDELINE ONE: Government Media Must Inform All Citizens**

*During the period preceding an election, Government media must provide the public with relevant information so that citizens can make informed choices in the election. In particular, Government media must provide information about:*

- \* The political parties and candidates contesting the election;*
- \* The issues which are the subject of the campaign, including material in party manifestos;*
- \* The voting process itself and all other information which will assist people to participate in the election.*

**Commentary:**

- GUIDELINE THREE: Government Must Protect Media**
1. Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that governments have an obligation to ensure that **"Every citizen shall have the right and opportunity, without distinction to vote at genuine elections."**
  2. Governments in countries where the majority of people have no experience of multi-party elections have a particular responsibility to ensure the widespread dissemination of relevant information about elections.
  3. The right to vote is particularly important to people who are illiterate. Governments must ensure that they have access to all information about how to vote.
  4. Governments must provide, either through broadcast media or through other information initiatives, an election information service accessible by all voters residing in the country.

**GUIDELINE TWO: Government Media Must Be Impartial**

2. *Government media must be balanced and impartial in reporting of news and information regarding an election. In particular, Government media should ensure that programmes and information services are not biased in favour of one candidate or one party, but should provide equitable access to media for all candidates and parties contesting the election.*

**Commentary:**

- OUR: Government Must Not Censor**
1. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: **"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."**
  2. In order to guarantee citizens this right, the state must ensure access to public media of opinions and ideas expressed by all parties and candidates during an election period. Journalists must be free to exercise their professional judgement in election coverage free of guidance or direction from governmental or state authorities.
  3. The state-owned media should make a distinction in editorial coverage between official duties of government representative and election campaigning activity they may undertake on behalf of their party and its candidates in the election.

**GUIDELINE THREE: Government Must Protect Media**

*The Government is obliged to protect media organisations and media employees from all forms of intimidation, violence or acts of harassment.*

*The Government should investigate, prosecute and punish illegal actions intended to interfere with media freedom or to restrict the free exercise of journalism.*

**Commentary:**

1. The United Nations recently appointed a Special Rapporteur, Abid Hussein, on the question of freedom of expression and opinion and to consider, among other issues, safety of journalists.

This appointment, with other UN declarations on the question, particularly by Unesco and the UN Human Rights Commission, underscores the special importance which the international community attaches to the physical protection of journalists.

2. Effective protection of media personnel, equipment and premises is vital to ensure that the media can satisfactorily carry out the public function of informing the public about matters of public interest. This is particularly important at election time.

**GUIDELINE FOUR: Government Must Not Censor**

*The Government must not censor election programmes and must guarantee editorial and professional autonomy of journalists during the period preceding an election.*

*Governments should create independent commissions to monitor the election process with responsibility to review and to report on media coverage.*

**Commentary:**

1. The Government should issue a clear statement to the public that all media are encouraged to freely publish and broadcast election-related news and information and that media organisations will not be penalised for broadcasting programmes or publishing information because they are critical of the actions or policies of the Government or the ruling party.

2. Government must not review election programmes or articles and news items prior to broadcast or publication.

**GUIDELINE FIVE: *Government Must Open the Airwaves***

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*Government media must provide opportunities for legal political parties and candidates to air their views, without interference in the content and form of expression of their views, other than in the context of journalistic presentation of information.*

*Access to election candidates should be granted:*

- a) *directly, through the provision of direct-access programmes allocated without discrimination and on equal terms to all parties and candidates;*
- b) *indirectly, through the exercise of professional journalism in which the right of reply and correction should be granted to any candidates or party that makes a reasonable claim of having been defamed or injured.*

**Commentary:**

1. In the first election of a transitional democracy that media, whether state-owned or private, should be fair and inclusive. In some elections this can appear impractical and difficult (in Namibia 14 political parties equally shared broadcast time in 1989 and in some countries in Eastern Europe dozens of parties contesting the first election were given air time.)

A particular problem is viewer and listener interest, which can quickly diminish when a multitude of voices clamours for attention. However, the principle of equal time gives all parties a voice, demonstrates variety in content and form of political choice, and promotes confidence in the election process.

2. Inter-party agreement should be established to elaborate the process for obtaining and granting direct access.
3. The process of purchasing election advertising should be regulated to ensure equality of opportunity to limit the advantage of richer parties.

**GUIDELINE SIX: *Government Media Must Educate Voters***

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*The Government must ensure that all potential voters in all regions of the country are able to receive information which will enable them to vote.*

**Commentary:**

1. The Government's obligation of balance and impartiality regarding the fundamental rights of voters also extends to providing voters with such

1. information regarding the election process as they need to exercise their freedom of expression.
2. The election process can be bewildering even in countries with a tradition of parliamentary and multi-party democracy and is much more so in countries where communications are limited and many citizens have had minimal education opportunities.
3. Special election information campaigns, which must be accurate and impartial, carried out in local languages and organised through radio, TV, press and public meetings in district and village centres, are an essential component in any voter education strategy.
4. Any voter education campaign must pay special attention to the needs of women, religious minorities and tribal minorities, many of whom may have been excluded from the political process.
5. Governments should use appropriate expertise, such as that provided by national human rights organisations, in the elaboration of a voter education programme.

#### **GUIDELINE SEVEN: *Government Media Must be Professional***

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*Government media must demonstrate the highest standards of journalism and must provide balanced, accurate and impartial coverage of news and current affairs and Government must establish a mechanism for regulating and monitoring election broadcasts.*

#### **Commentary:**

1. Because news reporting provides the most influential information of an election campaign, the election process is the greatest test of professionalism in journalism. State media must provide journalists with the best professional conditions in which to work.
2. Many countries establish systems to monitor the time allocated by news programmes to various parties and issues and make efforts to ensure that corrections take place to try to ensure balance in coverage.
3. It is important to allow journalists to distinguish between editorial coverage of official duties by ministers and government officers and coverage of their activities in as candidates in an election.
4. Journalists should not be subject to pressures or corrupt practices (such as accepting "facilities" for transport or communications provided by candidates or parties in elections);

5. Governments should establish, where possible, a central election communication centre to which journalists have access and which provides a clearing house for information and news regarding the election.

### III. Guidelines for Media

The following guidelines were drafted by the IFJ at the request of the OHR and OSCE for the Open Broadcast Network of Bosnia-Herzegovina, a nation-wide independent television supported by the international community. They have since been widely endorsed and provide some key elements in the elaboration of a policy for fairness, reliability and impartiality in election reporting.

1. *The objective of media election coverage will be, from the outset, to provide the most extensive information service for all sections of the population of the country, reflecting the multicultural nature of society and the variety of different opinions and views which exist.*
2. *The Board of Governors of the broadcaster will not interfere with the editorial and professional autonomy of journalists and will protect the independence of the Editorial Board in its role.*
3. *The broadcaster will aim to ensure that programmes and information services are not biased in favour of one candidate or party but will aim to provide equitable access for all candidates and parties contesting the election.*
4. *The broadcaster will provide opportunities for legal political parties and candidates to air their views, without interference in the content and form of expression, other than in the context of journalistic presentation of information.*
5. *Access to election candidates will be granted in two ways:*
  - a) *directly through the provision of direct-access programming allocated without discrimination and on equal terms to all parties and candidates;*
  - b) *indirectly, through the exercise of professional journalism in which the right of reply and correction will be granted to any candidates or parties with a reasonable claim of having been defamed or injured. All decisions will be taken by the Editorial Board.*
6. *The broadcast will endeavour to ensure that all potential voters in all regions of the country are able to receive information which will enable them to vote.*
7. *The broadcaster will aim to provide the public with relevant information so that citizens can make informed choices in the election. In particular, this will include information about:*

- a) *political parties and candidates contesting the election;*
  - b) *the issues which are the subject of the election campaign, including material in party manifestos;*
  - c) *the election process itself and all other information which will assist people to participate in the election.*
8. *The broadcaster will establish an internal election monitoring mechanism to ensure that balanced, accurate and impartial coverage of news and current affairs is maintained according to the principles of the Editorial Charter.*

#### **IV. Surviving the Election: Tips for Journalists**

##### **a) CONFRONTING THE PROBLEM OF BIAS**

Allegations of bias in the news media happen all the time, but they are most evident at election time.

Journalists know that to politicians and public interest groups, the omission of certain news items or issues from newspapers and radio and television news bulletins, the angle given to a story or the choice made about its place in a page or a bulletin, will sometimes be construed as a deliberate act of bias.

More often than not, journalists make these choices on the basis of sound professional judgement. But mistakes are made. When deadlines are tight and pressures are greatest, the weighing of these factors may be less thorough. In general, journalists must strive for fairness and for decisions made solely on the basis of news value.

The "conspiracy theory" of deliberate bias is rejected by most journalists as being based on an inadequate knowledge by outsiders of the editorial process. As insiders we know, too often, that it is lapses of judgement and cock-up rather than conspiracy that is to blame when things go awry in the newsroom.

Rejecting the notion of conspiracy, one senior newspaper editor has written:

*"We do not conspire with outsiders because we are newspaper people -- not politicians, megalomaniacs or political dilettantes. We do not slant news to favour any political party because -- apart from being a fraud on our readers and bad journalism -- to do so is dishonest. Journalism in its purest form is simply telling the truth, so long as it is in the public interest. We do not conspire with outsiders. We do not write for politicians or parties. We write for people".*

Most journalists might accept that, but we all know, too, that political pressure exists. Often it is based upon the traditional community of support which media appeal to --



liberal newspapers tend to be left of centre in their editorial columns; conservative newspapers will favour right of centre politics.

Partisan journalism can be good journalism. Campaigning journalism has often nurtured the best tradition in the profession but the opinions of the editorial columns should not interfere with the process of news gathering, news selection and placement.

That is something which journalists always try to respect and that is difficult for many outside journalism to understand. Therefore, allegations of deliberate, political bias are easy to make and often difficult to refute.

The choices to be made between different kinds of news and views every day and the omission of some items and the inclusion of others is bound to result in professional judgement which can be defined as bias. A journalist comments:

*"Of course the press is biased. The gathering, editing and publishing of news involves decisions by people who inevitably bring their own background, values and prejudices to bear on deciding what to select, emphasize and colour as news.*

*"Bias is inevitable; it is lack of balance in the representation of a range of views that is criticised. Lack of balance may characterise not only the way politics is presented in reports, but more generally, the way women, unions, homosexuals and minorities are reported."*

Even media critics, if pressed, would acknowledge that the media cannot be entirely free of bias. They would accept, for instance, that the editorial column, which serves as the institutional voice of newspaper on a wide range of issues, must of necessity be biased because it expresses an opinion, even though such opinion must always be based on confirmed facts. Nor would they object to the right of columnists to express their opinions, even if they disagree with them.

Generally, what is objected to is a lack of balance in news columns, which are supposed to contain objective reportage, as far as that can be achieved. Deliberate bias, sometimes slight, sometimes excessive, is the result of a conscious decision by the reporter, editor or proprietor to be partisan rather than even-handed.

Examples are the suppression of essential or important facts and the deliberate distortion of other facts through wrong or improper emphasis. Bias happens also when, for instance, newsreaders summarize speeches of the opposition with little or no footage whereas they run long footage of the speech by the ruling party candidate. Bias can also be seen in "camera angles" when TV crews are asked to focus on a campaign rally in such a way that it appears larger than it really is. Or when they are being asked to film the "best" or the "worst" profile of a candidate.

But the fact that a newspaper prints more news about the President or Prime Minister than about the Opposition leader or opposition candidate is not of itself evidence of deliberate bias. It might reflect the fact that the President or Prime Minister does or says

more as a result of the duties of his or her office; or that the President or Prime Minister is interesting and the opponent is dull; or that they provide information to meet deadlines.

Many journalists question whether it is the job of the media to go out of their way to polish up the Opposition's image or improve its media skills to account for any such deficiencies. However, it is the media's job to act fairly. Remember that many politicians are skilled at manipulating people, including media.

Some candidates are so obsessed with getting their message across without any journalistic filter that they have resorted to new ways of addressing directly the electorate.

In the 1992 presidential elections in the United States maverick billionaire candidate Ross Perot rented television time to avoid having to talk to free media. He could, and did, buy all the airtime he wanted. The bad news for our profession was that each time he attacked journalists, the switchboard of his headquarters was overwhelmed with calls from people volunteering for his campaign.

Some candidates went on the television talk-show circuit with no journalist present and answered questions fielded directly by the public. Journalists should carefully listen to the questions asked by the public: they may serve as an excellent barometer of real public concerns and as a warning for journalists as to the way they effectively cover those concerns.

Never forget that you are a link between the event and the reader, listener or viewer and not a veil. News coverage should not become a barrier between the candidates and the voters. It should be a bridge connecting them.

*"That desire of the people to become more involved in the political process is here to stay," says Seymour Topping of the American Society of Newspaper Editors . "It will have increasing influence on newspapers as well as the electronic media. People will want to be in a position to have their views recorded more often and at greater length in newspapers. This can be done through letters to the editor, it can be done through op-ed pages and in news columns in the sense that reporters are drawn more to talk to the people themselves rather than addressing all their questions to politicians or to the leaders in business and the professions."*

Always be prepared for media bashing. Many candidates, especially lacklustre or losing candidates, think they get unfavourable coverage in the press and try to put the blame on the media. Do not be intimidated. Just do your job.

A final word: bias is also about news priorities. We can choose to focus on a particular issue, or we can join the herd in following a particular controversy, or we can decide to refrain from getting behind the glitz and the glamour of personality or character politics.

Bias occurs when we focus on the internal dynamics of an election campaign, on its "horse race" model instead of digging deep into the most substantive issues of the day.

Beware of allowing a gap to grow between your news values and the nation's real concerns. According to studies in the United States<sup>2</sup> "the voters' concerns are closer to those of the candidates. The Markle Commission's study of the 1988 campaign concluded that voters believe they get their best information about the candidates from debates". And not from journalists!

Bias should be fought by media organisations. A process of checks and balances can be set up within the newsroom itself in order to correct imbalance in reporting. Some media organisations have adopted operating procedures that guide journalists in the day-to-day dilemmas of their work.

Some have devised a reviewing process that closely monitors the performance of the newsroom. Others have even appointed a readers' representative or ombudsman that is supposed to attend to readers' complaints and to review the way the newspaper has covered a particular story.

Let us not forget that self-regulation and internal control procedures are always better than control by a press council stocked with "wise men" recruited outside of the profession and often endowed with legal or punitive powers.

#### b) AN EDITOR'S MODEL FOR ELECTION COVERAGE

By JEAN PAUL MARTHOZ (former IFJ Media for Democracy Director, Press Officer at Human Rights Watch)

Planning is essential to effective election coverage. The model below can be used as a checklist by editors or election coverage task forces. It gives also some guidance on special editorial approaches to the campaign.

Be careful, however, to adapt this model to local realities. But do not accept the argument that poorly-funded media do not have the means to really follow those rules. Good journalism can be poor!

- \* **Check with the electoral commission** all the details of the coming poll: registration date, start and closing day of the campaign period, election day specifics (how the polling will be organized, timetable for election returns, etc).
- \* **Study the election rules:** voting system, electoral laws, poll watching, laws governing international observation delegations, use of public opinion surveys, political advertising regulations, access to state media, electoral expenses limitations, etc).

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<sup>1</sup> Out of Order by Thomas Patterson

- \* **Join with other media**, unions of journalists, publishers' and broadcasters' associations in order to prepare the profession's guidelines and code of conduct and a charter to be submitted to all political parties committing them to respect journalists and protect them against harassment by their supporters.

Consideration should be given to setting up a election media monitoring group composed of well known personalities and in charge of investigating any aggression against the press and to promptly act upon them.

- \* **Explain to your readers** your reporting rules, how you are going to cover the campaign and why.

- \* **Budget the election reporting**: an election campaign is usually good business for the media but it also costs a lot of money. You will need extra phone lines, faxes, additional cars and drivers, more overtime. Plan carefully and allocate resources wisely. Low-balling your budget will get you into trouble.

- \* **Select your task force**: Election coverage is the political desk's golden hour but it should not be its exclusive preserve. All departments can be asked to perform duties according to their skills. Specialised writers will be commissioned to analyze issues in their beat (economics, health, foreign affairs, economics, labour, education), to compare competing political programmes, to scrutinise speeches and position papers, to track inconsistencies and expose propaganda.

The foreign desk for instance might be assigned to stories related to international observer teams, foreign press coverage, role of international organisations in the campaign, etc.

Some media choose to set up a special election desk for the last weeks of the campaign. This option should be studied carefully especially in small newspapers. The election campaign should not obfuscate the rest of the news.

- \* **Appoint an editorial panel**: it will be charged with reviewing delicate questions that may arise as the campaign develops. It should include the editor-in-chief, the relevant department head, and a few distinguished commentators or reporters.

- \* **Plan technical and operational arrangements**: pin down the advertising department (some pages should be considered ad-free during the campaign, precise guidelines should be given to acceptance and placement of political advertising), the production manager (he must provide for later deadlines on election day and for additional pages), and the distribution manager.

- \* **Recruit additional personnel**: young journalists to handle the information flow on election day, phone and fax operators, secretaries, drivers, etc.

- \* **Contact resource persons**: they will be of much help to give expert advice during the election campaign and as soon as the results are public. Election

- \* pundits, political scientists, public opinion analysts, should be on standby and attached to your particular media. Appointments should be arranged in advance with political party leaders for election-night comments on results. But do not overwhelm your readers with excessive punditry. Ordinary citizens should have their say too.
- \* **Check your photo files:** you should have as many pictures of candidates as possible stored in your photo library.
- \* **Plan for emergencies:** what do you do if something breaks down on your side (your computer falls dead, your local journalist cannot contact you, one of your reporters is arrested or wounded, etc) and on the side of the government (failure in the collation of results, charges of irregularities, etc).

Planning is all-important, but never forget that your first responsibility is to the readers, the viewers and listeners.

- \* **Citizen's groups** which are formed to help voters use the power which elections put at their disposal are very useful. Take, for example, this advice given by Project Vote Smart in the US to American voters:
  1. Remember who is in charge. In our democracy the citizen is the boss. Elected officials are temporary hired help.
  2. View the election campaign as the politician's job application.
  3. Ask yourself if the candidates are giving you, the employer, the information needed to decide who is best for the job.
- \* **Civic education:** media must carefully and repeatedly explain the principles and techniques of voting and what the election will lead to (a new parliament, separation of powers, transparency, etc).

Media should introduce an open line to readers so they might ask questions on specific points of the campaign and air their views (note the "Election Platform" idea of Nation Newspapers in Kenya reported earlier).

Run more interviews with voters not just "vox-pop" and quick quotes gathered in the street, but meaningful probing of how families are surviving in an economic crisis or how they deeply feel about education opportunities for their children.

- \* **Public opinion polling:** unprofessional polls are bad news, for voters and for media. Never commission surveys that do not stick to the highest standards and never print them without fully explaining the conditions and the limits of the survey. Expose any fraud in a political party or newspaper survey. Never forget that polls will never replace old-style political reporting.

- \* **Start well ahead of election day:** prepare profiles of major candidates, close-ups on most electoral districts (economic base, population profile, major problems, party dominance).
- \* **Cover the issues:** Pile up documentation on campaign issues (official figures, the state of the debate, major players and lobbies, etc.). Cover those issues independently from party positions, report on issues that are neglected by political parties. Too often issues are presented as just a conflict between opposing sides and not as objects of serious debate.  
  
Always ask: What's missing in the news today? Read everything, remember what the candidates said (and did) over a period of years not just days. Do not confuse lobbying by interest groups or media-generated excitement with a grass-roots political movement.
- \* Do not be afraid of repeating explanatory studies of difficult issues. The "We've already done it" or "It does not interest anybody" cynicism should never be welcome in a newsroom. At election time it should be banned.
- \* **Improve your sub-editors' team:** make stories and issues accessible to readers, de-code all political jargon, track down and annihilate all long words that render already difficult concepts totally incomprehensible.
- \* **Beware of "pack" journalism:** shy away from the tendency to follow candidates like a pack of wolves which leads to concentrate on the same events and interpret them in the same way. This happens particularly when a candidate is seen as rising in the polls: when a candidate's support increases sharply the coverage of his candidacy becomes more favourable.
- \* **Keep in Touch with who is behind a party or a candidate:** examine possible conflicts of interest. Look at a candidate's record or promises and commitments: ask who has benefited or would benefit from a candidate's proposals.  
  
Follow the money: who is financing the campaign, what are the interests of those providing the money, and how will they benefit from the government (new legislation, regulatory power).
- \* **Use all forms of journalism:** long reportage, analytical pieces, graphs, satire, sketches and cartoons, investigative journalism (who is behind a particular candidate, the role of special interests, etc), photojournalism, profiles, interviews, contradictory debates.
- \* **Open Space:** Give politicians from different parties the possibility to write columns for your paper on a fair and rotating basis. But stop this process at least two weeks before election day so as not to give undue advantage to one of the candidates and not to overwhelm your readers with party propaganda.

- \* **Get acquainted with campaign tricks:** Beware of stunts and cooked-up events designed just to grab headlines.
- \* **Press releases:** Do not just publish political parties' press releases: check them, use them as a source for a more balanced story. Do not run for "photo-opportunities". Do not overhype controversy: a contrived rumour campaign can lead you far away from voters' real interests.
- \* **Be credible:** Never forget that your long-term credibility is always at stake. Follow closely each candidate's advertising campaign. Some media have columns which scrutinise campaign promises and advertising techniques. Expose falsification and distortion wherever you find it. Clearly identify and attribute any information coming from sources other than obtained from independent reporting.
- \* **After the election:** review the way your team covered the campaign. Compare your performance with that of the competition.
- **Train your staff in reporting a multiparty parliament or a coalition government.** Follow up the candidates' election campaign promises. Check their records against their commitments. Keep an eye out for conflicts of interest: the type of legislation actively pushed by an MP can give you a tip on the identity of his financial backers.

#### c) HOW TO DETECT POTENTIAL ELECTION IRREGULARITIES

One of the major stakes in any election is its level of fairness and transparency. Even when the poll is being monitored by representatives of political parties, electoral or international observation teams, journalists should attempt to determine by themselves the degree to which any problems affect the quality of the electoral process.

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs in the United States gives these guidelines to its observer teams. They might be used as an inspiration for journalists: *"Try to observe, research and record the severity, frequency and pattern of any of the following issues and the number of voters influenced.*

- \* **Unfair attempts to influence voters** or election officials through bribes, employment promises, threats, intimidation, systematic disruption of the election process, unbalanced media access;
- \* **Disenfranchisement of voters** through: unreasonably restricting the registration process, unreasonably restricting candidate eligibility, failing to properly list registered voters, failing to distribute voter identification cards, requiring unreasonable supplemental voter identification, systematic complication of the election process, incomplete distribution of election materials;

\* **Fraud**, such as stealing ballots, stuffing ballots, destroying ballots, misreading, miscounting, providing misleading reports to the media, voting twice, trying to remove indelible ink;

\* **Logistical problems**, including insufficient number of ballots, ballots missing for certain parties, insufficient number of envelopes, ink that washes off, inadequate secrecy of the vote, missing officials, missing voter registry, no artificial lights; and

\* **Civic education**: voters do not seem to have a reasonable understanding of their right to freely choose a candidate or how to express their choice, and administrators do not have a reasonable understanding of their duties and how to execute them."

#### d) **PUBLIC OPINION POLLING**

Public opinion polls are a common feature in most elections. They can be commissioned by the media, by political parties or social organisations. Most media-commissioned polls are based on the horse race model: who's ahead, who is behind? and often play an excessive role in the campaign coverage.

They are often unconvincing and very much open to manipulation and misjudgments. Of course, they get top billing in news coverage, most poll stories appearing on the front page. But a poll story is entirely manufactured. It is pseudo-news created by media who create it, pay for it, and then report on it.

Journalists should give more prominence to surveys on issues. Public opinion polls should be used as a news gathering tool in order to identify expectations from the electorate.

This form of journalism is called "precision journalism", that is using scientific research methods to collect and report news. Those methods come mainly from the social sciences, sociology, psychology, political science. Some use qualitative techniques (as the case study, the oral history, or participant intervention) that require elaborate preparation for in-depth interviews, others use quantitative techniques, that is essentially the scientific poll.

Generally journalists will be expected to comment on polls commissioned by others. Therefore they will need a basic understanding of polling techniques in order to analyze and interpret accurately the survey data as well as to identify possible manipulation or misinterpretation.

This familiarity with polling techniques can also be extremely valuable when a media commissions its own survey. A journalist should always be assigned to work with the professional pollster and should be knowledgeable about sampling procedures, questionnaire elaboration, and data analysis.



Journalists should carefully review guidelines published by some respected polling organizations like the American Association of Public Opinion Research. Such organisations recommend that news stories based on public opinion surveys include the following information:

- \* The date or dates of the interviews;
- \* The name of the sponsoring organization (e.g. this poll was commissioned by the Democratic Party or by the Trade Union Confederation);
- \* The quantitative characteristics of the sample: population base, sample size (total number of respondents). For opinion polls, the sampling size tends to range from 400 to 2,500. The larger the sample the lesser the margin of error. However the latter figure is more than adequate, regardless of the size of the population. The information should also mention the number of people in any subsample on which a result is based;
- \* The manner in which interviewing was done, usually either by telephone, written questionnaire or face-t-face;
- \* The exact wording of key questions;
- \* The margin of error

*Marta Lagos, a public opinion pollster from Chile gave this advice when assisting in the Namibian transition. Her remarks were designed to political party pollsters but they help understand the importance of public opinion polling for journalists as well:<sup>3</sup>*

"You must have information on what people are thinking: what people want in social, economic and political terms, and how much they expect from what they want. The question of expectations is crucial for the stability of the political process after the election has taken place.

"You have to have information about political parties, the organizations that are taking place in the election. Which are partners? Which are your opponents? What are their characteristics? What are their messages? You need information about institutions. For example, what is a role of the church as an institution in the political arena?

"The selection of issues is most important. Among the most important are:

- \* Information about political parties: which parties the individual likes.

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<sup>3</sup> (From: Padraig O'Malley, *Uneven Paths: Advancing Democracy in Southern Africa*, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, Washington, 1993).

\* Voter intention: how the individual voted in the last election and if he or she stays with the same party or whether he or she is changing his or her mind; Whether he or she is undecided;

## 2. The Electoral Commissions

\* The positive traits and the personality of the candidate: what the individual likes the most and the least;

\* Confidence in the performance of institutions -parliament, the justice system, the armed forces, the media;

\* Political process: is the individual confident that the process is going to be fair?

\* Attitudes towards the importance of the vote: does the individual feel that his or her vote counts, that it matters whether he or she votes (this can reveal information about the turnout of the election)?

\* Attitudes towards politicians: are they corrupt, are they only looking out for their own interests, are they reliable and trustworthy?

## 3. Training and Capacity Building

\* The reliability of the media: does the individual believe what he or she sees on TV, hears on the radio, reads in the newspapers?"

# V. ORGANISING FOR FREE ELECTION REPORTING

## 1. Media Monitoring

Journalists are being observed as much as they observe during election time. Sometimes they resent this monitoring but independent media criticism (not legal sanctions) is part of the democratic process which can be used to improve the quality and professionalism of media.

Media monitoring normally includes:

- a quantitative study – how much time/space is devoted to each contender;
- a qualitative approach – content of stories news angles, placement of news;
- critical events analysis – what is being reported, what is missing;
- determining the hierarchy of news – is priority given to certain issues, are certain messages being repeated...

These points form the basis for an academic assessment of the election coverage published after the election has taken place.

But it is just as important, if not more so, to assess the conditions in which journalists report the elections (access to information, press conference, incidents of undue pressure, attacks against journalists). Especially in polarised societies and those where media is largely owned by political parties, conditions to allow professional reporting need to be carefully scrutinised. Media monitors need to address these issues and take

them up while the election campaign is still going on and certain problems can still be corrected.

## **2. The Electoral Commissions**

The electoral commissions have an important role to play in the implementation of the electoral law and the election as a whole.

Where the electoral law governs election coverage of publicly-owned media electoral commission can assist in drafting and implementing rules which guarantee editorial independence.

The commissions can also play a role in ensuring that libel and privacy laws are not misused to silence the press.

In order to ensure that journalists fully understand the electoral law and process electoral commissions should organised meetings with journalists and publishers to explain the electoral law and its implications for media and voter education.

## **3. Training and Capacity Building**

Well-trained professional media staff and strong, independent journalists' organisations are key to providing the right conditions for free election coverage. Initiatives by the international community should focus on three key areas:

- **practical in-country professional training** – programmes assisting journalists in reporting the elections professionally, by journalists for journalists;
- **creating the legal framework to ensure free election reporting** – legal advice to governments and electoral commissions, respect for fundamental human rights including freedom of expression should be the benchmark for co-operation and support;
- **capacity building** – in the long term media monitors and trainers should not be external experts but experts from the country/region, assistance programmes need to build the capacity in-country to carry out this work; further, assistance programmes need to strengthen independent journalists' organisation, building their capacity to effectively represent journalists' interests, defend press freedom and promote professional standards.