



IFJ Tips for Media on Elections Reporting

Introduction: The Elections Challenges

The need for objectivity, impartiality and balance in journalism is an everyday challenge for media professionals, but there is no greater test of professionalism in media than that posed by the heat and pressure of bitterly-fought political elections.

Elections also represent a test of political commitment to democracy, when the impulse to manipulate media and to control information is strongest among ruling parties and candidates running for office.

The election process provides a further challenge to media because it brings into sharp focus the need of media to provide citizens with access to all the facts, opinions and ideas being in the campaign. Journalists must also provide access to media so that citizen's voices can be heard above the babble of political debate.

This call to raise standards in journalism to levels of public expectations during elections campaign is more relevant than ever before, in the current climate of fake news fuelling misinformation on increasingly influential social networks. At the same time, covering elections carries some safety risks, which journalists need to assess, prevent and reduce.

The IFJ offers the following guidelines for a model of election coverage, combining professional ethics and safety tips.

A. Uphold Ethics of Journalism

Every journalist should seek to follow the time tested road map to excellence in covering elections, by considering the key professional ethics in media:

1. Editorial Independence

Independent journalism is an essential part of any credible democracy. Journalists in newsrooms and on the campaign trail must ensure that voters have access to impartial and independent information.

2. Facts Checking

The accuracy of information is a priority in elections reporting and journalists need to establish the candidates' statements by checking with credible sources such as officials, civil society organisations and elections monitors. Special care must be taken to confirm, before publication, information from social media which can be misleading or have a bias in favour of/against a candidate or a political party.

See example of fact checking in Indonesia: <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/article/indonesia-journalists-must-serve-the-public-interest-not-politicians.html>

3. Handling Bias Challenge

Allegations of bias in the news media happen all the time, but they are most evident at election time. Journalists know that for politicians and public interest groups consider as bias the omission of certain news items in newspapers, on radio and television news bulletins, the angle given to a story or the choice made about its place in a page or a bulletin. Journalists can allay those concerns by making efforts to achieve a balance in their reporting through a fair representation of candidates' views.

4. Keep Proper Tone in Reporting

Words and language matter in elections reporting. Journalists should use appropriate language and avoid inflammatory, hyperbole tone which can give false – or undermine – voters' hopes in the outcome. This includes measured commentary of polls, bearing in mind that they have over times proved unreliable and cannot replace good political reporting.

5. Guard against Hate Speech

Elections can be divisive on community, ethnic and party lines, providing some political actors to adopt hate speech and violent rhetoric. Journalists should never provide a platform for such politics and clear protocols must be developed to avoid media being used for inciting violence and hatred.

B. Good Planning for Safe Elections Reporting

6. Prepare Media Information Pack

Planning is essential to effective election coverage. Journalists need to be familiar with all the details of the elections, including registration date, start and closing day of the campaign period and election day specifics (organisation of the polling, schedule for elections returns and announcements of results, etc.) This information can be obtained from electoral commissions.

7. Check and Comply with Media accreditation Requirements

Journalists must check the requirements for covering elections and apply in good time for their accreditation to avoid delays and denial of access to candidates, electoral commissions' venues, polling stations, etc. A valid accreditation is also hugely important to ensure free movement when there are restrictions related to elections.

8. Initiate Media Elections Charter

Where there is a high risk of elections-related violence, journalists' unions should reach out to publishers' and broadcasters' associations in order to prepare media guidelines, a code of conduct and a charter to be submitted to all political parties, committing them to respecting journalists and protecting them against harassment by their supporters.

See example in Ukraine: <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-freedom/article/ukraine-pressures-on-investigative-journalists-during-the-electoral-campaign.html>

9. Look out for Signs of Confrontation

In a volatile political situation, anything can happen. Journalists need to be on the lookout for certain signs of violence. These include the presence of offensive weapons at events (stones, batons, guns, anti-tear gas kit, etc..) It is also vital to listen to what people in the crowd are saying, including on media organisations. Finally, journalists need to observe the presence of security forces and their attitude to the crowd.

10. Take Cover

If violence breaks out, seek a safe location to film and take pictures away from the immediate area of confrontation. Journalists should avoid at all times confrontation with the crowd and must keep their press credentials clearly visible unless they believe violence is targeted at media. In such cases, they must seek the protection of security forces and leave the area.

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