

20 Tips for Election Coverage

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1. YOU MUST HAVE A PLAN

An election campaign is a newsroom's golden hour. Coverage calls for careful planning because this involves major deployment of staff. Appoint an election task force comprising all staff likely to be involved. Your plan should be fully in effect from after Nomination Day. From then on, the plan grows as the momentum carries you along.

Important questions:

- *What are the key issues in this campaign?*
- *Who should lead the task force?*
- *What will each member of the team contribute?*
- *What training might be needed?*
- *What additional resources might be needed?*

2. FOCUS ON THE ELECTIONS COMMISSION; STUDY ELECTION RULES

Get polling details and Election Day specifics from the Elections Commission. Learn how to recognise election irregularities, attempts to bribe voters, election fraud, and disenfranchisement of voters. The journalist should understand the voting system, electoral laws, and what qualifies citizens to vote, including time and place of voting, what identification is needed for establishing eligibility, and the mechanism of voting, including secrecy of ballots.

3. VOTER EDUCATION IS THE MEDIA'S RESPONSIBILITY TOO

Excellence in election reporting takes as its starting point the voter's needs. Free and fair elections are not only about casting a vote in ideal conditions but also about having adequate information about the parties, policies, candidates and the electoral process to make an informed choice at the polls.

4. ACCURACY! ACCURACY! ACCURACY!

Accuracy should be a journalist's highest priority. This is most important during an election campaign. Research shows that most errors are caused by three reasons.

- Working from memory
- Making assumptions
- Depending on second-hand sources

- Being vague and inexact.

Beware of “creeping legitimacy,” or “herd journalism”, which occurs when one news organization publishes a story based on a rumour or unreliable sources, and others follow suit out of fear of missing the story. News organizations should apply the same reporting standards of double-checking every fact to political campaign rumours and scandals.

5. IF YOU GET IT WRONG

The essence of journalism is the discipline of verification. Should you get it wrong, however, you have an obligation to publish or broadcast a correction at the earliest opportunity.

6. COVER THE UNDERDOGS

A candidate thought to have no chance of winning the elections should still be covered with care and respect. Uneven coverage is a sure way to lose audience and credibility. Assignments to cover small-time parties and candidates provide good training opportunities for young reporters.

7. ACHIEVING BALANCE

A journalist should always strive for balance in reporting. If a candidate makes an allegation against another candidate or against an electoral official, the journalist should seek comments from the other sides wherever possible and ask for documentary or other compelling evidence to back up allegations.

8. STICK TO THE ISSUES

Watch out for candidates or parties that employ clever public relations tactics to call attention to their campaigns, while avoiding important issues like national security, the economy and jobs. Issue coverage is much more than presenting two opposing voices; the journalist should look beyond disagreements and seek to find out their root causes.

9. WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

Avoid using language or expressing sentiments that may promote violence or discrimination on any grounds, including race, religion or politics. When reporting the opinions of politicians and others who advocate discrimination or violence, a journalist should endeavour to put such views in context, and try to get the opinions of those against whom such sentiments are directed.

10. DO NOT ACCEPT INDUCEMENTS FROM CANDIDATES OR THEIR SUPPORTERS.

Maintain an arm's length relationship with the people you cover. Remember that independence is an underlying requirement of journalism.

11. DO NOT MAKE PROMISES TO POLITICIANS OR PARTY AGENTS ABOUT THE CONTENT OR PLACEMENT OF A REPORT.

If you are unable to deliver you could create enemies for your news organization.

12. BEWARE OF CAMPAIGN STUNTS AND TRICKS

Develop an understanding of the media strategies adopted by political parties to communicate their message. Make sure not to become unwitting servants of parties' media campaigns. Pay keen attention to press releases and letters to the editor, and make sure not to peddle rumours intentionally or not.

13. FOLLOW THE MONEY TRAIL

Campaign finance is one of the least covered areas of an election campaign. Admittedly it is time-consuming and a difficult area to cover. When done properly, however, it has tremendous audience appeal.

14. UPDATE YOUR PHOTO FILE

This is the time to get your picture file or video database updated. Be sure to have a variety of profiles of the candidates so the appropriate photo can be used to accompany stories.

15. DO THE RESEARCH

Memory is treacherous. Research gives journalism credibility and can help build trust among readers, viewers and listeners. Information about a candidate can offer important historical context to a story. Do the research and enhance your knowledge of the country's electoral history. Check newspaper files, electoral documents and talk to former electoral officials.

16. AVOID GIVING NUMBERS IN ESTIMATING THE SIZE OF CROWDS

Avoid estimates of crowd size. Unless you have a reliable means of ascertaining size—for example, the known number of seats in an auditorium or stadium—avoid giving figures. Stay away from “large”, “huge”, “massive”, “gigantic”, and “small”, “disappointing”, “paltry” or any term that suggests opinionating. Indicate size more indirectly: “The crowd filled the

complex and overflowed into the street and adjacent fields.” Or: “The crowd was tightly packed in about two thirds of the square, and scores of buses were parked in nearby city streets.”

17. REPORTING OPINION POLLS: WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Take care when reporting the findings of opinion polls. They are often misused and manipulated to mislead audiences. When reporting findings of polls, make sure the following questions have been answered:

- What is the experience of the pollster?
- Who commissioned and paid for the poll?
- How many persons were interviewed?
- What kinds of people were interviewed e.g. age, economic and education status?
- When was the poll conducted?
- How was the poll conducted e.g. telephone, Internet, face-to-face?
- What questions were asked?
- What is the margin of error?

18. EXAMINE YOUR OWN BIASES

Examine yourself for biases. Do not deny they exist, but understand what your own biases are and make sure they are safely parked at the back of your head. Do not allow these biases to distort your coverage.

19. BRING ELECTION COVERAGE TO LIFE

Don't be predictable. Provide your audience with the element of surprise by producing innovative stories. Instead of telling a candidate's life story focus on a particular period in time such as “Where were you when Guyana gained independence?” Being there, for on-the-scene observation, is one of the best approaches for good reporting. Then try to convey the scene and the atmosphere of events, activities and personalities in all their fullness, drawing upon all the senses—look, listen, smell, taste and feel the story—so that the audience can do so too.

20. BE SAFE

Try to understand the lay-out of meeting venues. Dress comfortably and stick together with other media people, keeping your media passes visible. Make sure to have means of direct communication with your newsroom, and reliable transportation. Let the police or security guards present know that you're around, and where. Stay calm, don't be intimidated, or give the impression that you are. Avoid shouting matches with fired-up supporters. Take

no unnecessary risks with your personal safety. Be cautious always.

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