

COVERING ELECTIONS IN SMALL STATES

Guidelines for Broadcasters

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Election Coverage

“We believe in the liberty of the individual under the law, in equal rights for all citizens regardless of gender, race, colour, creed or political belief and in the individual’s inalienable right to participate by means of free and democratic processes in framing the society in which he or she lives”. (One of the Commonwealth principles agreed in 1971 and re-affirmed in the Harare Declaration twenty years later.)

“All broadcast outlets, large or small, rich or poor, have a public service duty to contribute to free and fair elections in any way they can. Radio and TV create and foster the democratic environment by telling the truth, by investigating the hidden, by explaining the background, by presenting the facts so that a well informed electorate can make reasoned choices”. (Commonwealth Election Broadcasting Guidelines)

“The media has a very important role in a democracy. It is up to journalists, as well as voters, to find out what different parties stand for and to inform citizens about their policies and all the big issues”. (Elections New Zealand 2008)

The aim of any election coverage is to ensure that the electorate is able to make an informed choice. Voters are entitled to accurate, fair, impartial and balanced information about the election procedures and the positions of political parties/independents and/or candidates on issues.

Election broadcasts are subject to the same broadcasting and journalistic rules as other programmes. That is to say they must reflect established journalistic principles.

- Accuracy – the information is correct and is not in any way misleading or false.
- Integrity – the information is truthful, not distorted to justify a conclusion.
- Objectivity – the information reports fairly all relevant facts and significant points. It deals fairly and ethically with persons, institutions, issues and events.

Programmes should offer viewers and listeners an intelligent and informed account of issues so that they can form their own views.

Audiences must be able to trust what they hear on radio and see on television. Journalists must avoid doing or saying anything which could reasonably make viewers and listeners doubt their impartiality.

They must avoid publicly identifying themselves in any way with partisan statements or actions on controversial matters.

They must not broadcast views which could incite violence or hatred based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion or political conviction.

A reporter or specialist correspondent may express a professional journalistic

judgement but not a personal opinion. Audiences should not be able to tell from a programme a presenters' or correspondent's personal views on any controversial issue.

During an election campaign the broadcasters have an overriding duty to the electorate to cover the issues and arguments fairly. Editors must ensure that the main viewpoints and arguments are heard during the course of the campaign and that every part of the news and topical programming plays its part in helping audiences understand the issues. And in their reporting, journalists must talk to a broad range of voters. They must not ignore women or minority groups.

The parties contesting an election will be given programme time so that they can explain their policies directly to the electorate whose support they are seeking. All parties will seek to influence editorial decisions at election time. Programme makers must not let themselves be intimidated by the politicians. Complaints will be made throughout. Politicians complaining to reporters or producers should be told that any complaints they make will be dealt with at a higher level.

Several important principles apply at election time:-

- The public is entitled to hear the principal points of view of the various parties on all questions of importance.
- Broadcasters should provide credible, balanced and impartial accounts of issues so voters can make up their own minds.
- Broadcasting must not fall under the control of individuals or organised pressure groups who are influential either because of their wealth, family connections or their special position.
- A news item should be chosen for its importance – not because some outside source has ordered it to be included. News decisions have to be driven by the news judgement of the broadcasting journalists, who must ensure that they provide a thorough examination of the views, policies and campaigns of all the main political parties.
- Voters must be given opportunities to express their opinions and views freely.
- In order that they can do so, broadcasters must provide opportunities for the public to take part in political debates on election issues. Those taking part in such broadcasts must be as representative as possible of different views and sectors of society.

Preparing for an Election

Elections do not usually come out of the blue. In many countries, Parliaments have fixed terms by law so the broadcasters know when an election is due. But even if, because of important unexpected political developments, an election is called suddenly, the broadcasters must not be caught unawares. They must ensure proper planning and budgeting for all election coverage.

There are a number of essential steps which a broadcaster should take in preparing for an election:-

- Well before an election is due, set up a special elections unit, staffed by the station's most talented journalists to draw up plans for the campaign. It should meet regularly, weekly to begin with, but more frequently as the campaign period approaches. It may be a one-person unit on a very small station, but whatever the size, it will ensure that appropriate planning takes place.
- Train this election team during this pre-election period. See it is headed by an experienced senior journalist. As the elections approach, the team will inevitably expand.
- Draw up guidelines for coverage which include how to achieve balance, monitoring that balance, resisting pressure to act undemocratically, and responding to complaints from the parties which will inevitably arrive.
- Secure acceptance for these guidelines by all concerned as the agreed basis for election broadcasting. This includes the Ministry of Information, the major political parties and the official body responsible for running the election. If there are disagreements, it is better to sort these out beforehand when things are quiet rather than in the heat of an election.
- Publish these guidelines. This can be as a pamphlet, in newspapers or magazines, on a web-site on the Internet and of course on air. The wider the publicity given, the easier it will be to convince the nation of the honourable role you are playing in the democratic process.
- Establish an overall election programme plan which covers what programmes will be produced; their format, how the issues will be explained, what rules will apply to programmes where rival candidates are taking part. Communicate this plan to the electoral body, to the politicians and to the audience. Wherever possible get a consensus.
- Introduce a comprehensive system for monitoring the election output. Be able to judge at every point in the campaign the balance of the programmes up to that point and relate that balance to the output which will follow. It will often be necessary to adjust the output to maintain fairness. Editors need to assess each bulletin and where normal journalistic judgement creates an unavoidable temporary imbalance, they must rectify it as soon as possible over succeeding output.

- You will need to set up a system to log coverage given to each party. A large wall-chart with basic details of every election story broadcast entered after each bulletin/news program is one effective way of doing this. This will not only help in maintaining balance, but in answering the politicians who will complain they are not getting fair treatment.
- Educate the audience. Responsibility for voter education rests largely with the broadcasters. The media must get across to the public an understanding that their votes matter, politics matters, politics are about their lives, their health, their education, their culture, their security, their future. Creating a democratic environment is not necessarily a heavy intellectual exercise.
- Have a register of good speakers. Some politicians are boring and poor communicators; many of the leading politicians of all parties may be poor broadcasters. But in many countries politicians are groomed for TV and radio. Where possible, the politicians who are the best communicators should be invited to take part in programs.

Reporting a Campaign

“Voters need information on the options in order to decide how to vote. Including what existing MPs have done and each party's stance on a range of issues. Alongside campaigning by parties and candidates, the news media plays a vital role by providing much of the information that voters use when deciding how to vote”. (Elections New Zealand 2008)

The same journalistic standards apply as much in election programmes as elsewhere.

Achieving balance

To help ensure that news programmes achieve an appropriate balance in their coverage, note carefully who is used and how much time they or that party has had on air. Senior broadcasting staff must be able to demonstrate that the main parties or candidates contesting the election were given approximate equivalent opportunities to take part in programmes (i.e. to be heard and questioned) and that minor parties or candidates have not been treated unreasonably or unfairly in the allocation of airtime, given their size or the support they command.

Here is the advice several leading broadcasters have given their journalists on steps that can be taken to ensure fair election coverage.

- Equitable treatment is unlikely to be achieved in a single programme but can be achieved in a series of programmes. Audiences should be told opposing viewpoint(s) will be aired in the next programme in the series and they should be told when it will be transmitted.
- Single programmes should avoid individual editions getting badly out of balance. There may be days when inevitably one party dominates the news agenda (e.g. when it launches its manifesto) but in that case care must be taken to ensure that coverage of similar prominence is given to the other manifesto launches on the relevant days.
- Daily programmes must maintain fair balance over the course of each week of the campaign. Each programme should be careful to ensure it does not get out of balance.
- Each strand (e.g. a late afternoon show on radio as people are going home after work) is responsible for reaching its own targets within the week and cannot rely on any other outlets at difference times of day (e.g. a breakfast show) to do so for it.
- Every edition of the multi-item programmes which cover the campaign should refer in at least one item to each of the main parties.
- Weekly programmes, or running series within daily sequence programmes, which focus on one party or another should trail both forwards and backwards so that it clear to the audience that balance is built in over time.

Fair Coverage

Broadcasters should ensure that they avoid giving the impression of one-sidedness or favouring one particular party. They must act and be seen to be acting in a fair and independent manner. Any journalists who hold political office or are active in political campaigning or standing for Parliament should be banned from broadcasting or taking part in editorial decision-making during the election period. A station should have a rule that its journalists - newsroom bulletin writers and reporters, especially those who appear on television - are forbidden from expressing their own political views. While on duty, they must not wear or exhibit symbols or colours associated with any political party or contestants during the election period. Otherwise this destroys their credibility and that of their station. They should exercise great caution before accepting lifts to rallies or other such assistance from any party. Gifts should not be accepted.

Does “fair” mean “equal” treatment for all in the election? Here is how South Africa’s SABC answers this dilemma:

- The SABC will treat all parties and all viewpoints equitably. But this does not mean we will distort our news values and processes by giving the same weight to small one-person parties as we do to serious contenders for a place in national or provincial government. The electorate is entitled to more comprehensive coverage of serious contenders for a place in government.
- Equitable treatment is achieved over time. It is unlikely to be achieved in a single programme. This also means that not all parties have the right to appear on every programme.
- We will be consistent in our treatment of contesting parties and conflicting views.
- We will not only rely on parties to bring information to us, but will actively seek out information. Failure to do so would skew our coverage in favour of those parties with more resources.

In a general election campaign there is a risk of top politicians, such as the President or Prime Minister and government ministers, trying to manipulate events for political advantage. They try to turn routine ministerial engagements into extra electioneering broadcast opportunities. Journalists should be very sceptical, asking themselves whether the particular appearance of a minister is strictly on government business or part of their election campaign. Politicians who try to exploit their official engagements will find the event reported, but not any blatant electioneering statements.

In Australia, for example, if the Prime Minister requests time to address the nation on a matter of national interest, he has to submit a request to the national broadcaster, ABC. If the ABC grants the request, it will reserve the right to offer the leader of the Opposition the right of reply if the broadcaster considered the Prime Minister’s request is of a party political nature.

In many countries, it is the Ministry of Information's news agency which gathers news from around the country and feeds it, often highly selectively, to the radio and television newsrooms. Stations are pressured into putting out this material unedited, unchecked and unchallenged. Just because a story arrives via a government news agency does not mean it does not need checking. If a station's journalists know from other reliable sources that a report put out by the Ministry of Information is untrue, it should inform its viewers and listeners and put out a correct report, using a formula such as "X denies the claim by the Ministry of Information that..... X says....." (*Commonwealth Election Broadcasting Guidelines*)

Likewise, "news" coming from a Presidential Press Office should be treated in similar fashion and not be broadcast prominently in a bulletin with not a word altered or dropped. It is for the news editor to judge an item's value and accuracy.

Political parties often try to demand that a particular journalist covers (or should be barred from covering) their campaign meetings and rallies. They must be told this is not allowed. The editor must be free to decide which reporter to assign to a particular story.

Party Election Broadcasts

Normally, political parties are given time slots (free in some countries) where they can put out programmes setting out for voters their policies. The content of these party political broadcasts is primarily a matter for the party making the broadcast and is therefore not required – or expected – to be impartial. The broadcaster remains responsible for the broadcast as publisher and requires the parties to observe proper standards of legality, taste and accuracy.

How much airtime a party can have, and how long each broadcast, is likely to be laid down by an independent regulatory body. At every election, the parties fighting the campaign should be issued with a detailed guide outlining the allocation of time on radio and television, the conditions for broadcasting, and the technical standards to be observed. It must show impartiality in the allocation of such broadcasts.

- As a general guide the government and main opposition party/parties are allocated equal time on air for their broadcasts. If parties are in coalition, either as government or as the official opposition, they will be given an equal allocation of time. It will be up to the parties which are in coalition to divide the time between them as they see fit.
- In New Zealand factors taken into consideration by the country's Election Commission in deciding how much time to allocate for party election broadcasts are:- the number of people who voted for that party at the previous election; the number of Members of Parliament a party had in the last parliament, any relationships that exists between that party and any other and any other indications of public support such as the number of party members.
- Significant minor or regional parties must also receive coverage during the campaign. The amount of time they will be given for the election broadcasts will be less than the main government and opposition parties, but will be proportionate. In some countries, e.g. Canada and India, it will be based on their representation in the outgoing Parliament or poll performance at the last general and state assembly elections.
- The broadcaster will maintain the same ratio for the allocation of broadcasts among the parties in each of the country's official languages where appropriate.

Each party political broadcast must be clearly identified as such before it begins (e.g. "Now follows a broadcast by the.....Party") and after it has ended ("That was a broadcast by the.....Party"). Audiences must be in no doubt what they are watching or hearing.

News staff must familiarize themselves fully with the law on election broadcasting - regulating matters like party election broadcasts, time to be made available to the various political parties, the duration and scheduling of party election broadcasts and political advertising during election periods.

The question of editorial control over the party election broadcasts must be spelled

out clearly. In countries such as Australia, Britain, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand, the parties make their election broadcasts themselves at their own expense and are responsible for their content. But they have to abide by ground rules, such as observing the law - for example on libel and incitement to racial hatred and violence - and observing the broadcasters' own guidelines on taste and decency.

They must ensure that their party broadcasts are not used as a vehicle for personal attack as distinguished from criticism of a party and its policies. The broadcaster should have the right to take out any material submitted for broadcast if, in the opinion of the broadcaster, it is of a defamatory nature, containing unacceptable abuse of political opponents.

It may be necessary for the broadcaster to offer production facilities; otherwise the technical quality of the broadcasts may be well below standard.

The Right to Reply

A broadcaster will usually afford political parties and/candidates the right of reply where a report aired on that station contains inaccurate information, or unfair criticism based on a distortion of facts. A station will usually have rules on this: Say, giving the opportunity to reply within 24 hours in a programme of similar weight and audience.

Mistakes on the part of the broadcaster must be corrected as soon as possible – within the same time slot if possible.

There should be a distinction between demands for the right to reply to mild or rhetorical criticism which is a proper part of the cut and thrust of lively political exchange and allegations of seriously inaccurate information, which could affect the way people vote.

Complaints Procedures

During election periods the need for quick resolution of complaints is very important. In New Zealand, for example, new procedures were drawn up by the Broadcasting Standards Authority for handling any complaints lodged against the media during the 2008 election campaign. Complaints came to the Authority, not to the broadcasters. A fast-track system was established to determine any “urgent complaint” within three days of receiving it. Elections can also be a time of high tension. Inaccuracies or inflammatory reporting may create extra tensions between different political forces or between communities.

Opinion Polls

Public opinion polls, where members of the public are asked how they intend to vote, should not be ignored during an election campaign, but they must be treated with great caution. A party may try to swing undecided voters by publishing so-called opinion polls that appear to put it in a strong position, thus creating a bandwagon effect.

In reporting the findings of voter intention polls, say who or which organisation carried out the poll, how it was conducted (e.g. face-to-face interview, by telephone or via the Internet) who commissioned it, how many people took part, when was it carried out, over how many days? What is the margin of error? Had anything happened which might have a significant effect on public opinion since the poll was conducted.

Poll results should not be the lead item in a news bulletin or programme. They are often interesting because they show a trend in voter intention. However, polls which defy the general trend without convincing explanation should be treated with scepticism and caution.

Polling Day

Strict rules usually apply on polling day. Campaigning stops. The broadcasters must ensure that they do not put out anything which could be construed as influencing the poll. Obviously there needs to be some reporting but it has to be purely factual. For example: the level of the turnout; (“voters turned out in large numbers as soon as the polls opened” “Long queues formed as soon as the polls opened” “turnout was low in many areas as voters heeded an appeal by the opposition parties to boycott the poll”) the weather (raining or not!) appearances by leading politicians at the polls – e.g. the Prime Minister voted in his home town/own constituency. How long until the polls close etc. When it comes to television, the cameras can film at a polling place (provided the election officials permit it) but no footage or photographs can be taken of voters filling out their ballot form, showing how a person voted.

Exit Polls

These are polls carried out on voting day when people are asked how they voted as they are leaving the polling station. They may predict the result accurately – but beware they can sometimes be wrong! Careful language must be used in reporting poll predictions. Use phrases like: “It looks as if “X” or “Y” will be the biggest party with between “A” or “B” number of seats”.

Reporting Referenda

The circumstances under which referenda are held vary considerably, but broadcasters must ensure during the campaign that their coverage is:

- Comprehensive. Give audiences as much information as possible, providing them with the full range of significant views
- Authoritative. The question being put to the voters is fully explained and the arguments for and against are fully tested. The audience should receive a clear picture of the weight of opinion on either side of the arguments
- Impartial. Journalists covering the campaign must not express a view for or against the issue being put before the public. Likewise, the tone of the reporting must never give the impression then broadcaster is taking sides.
- Fair. In most referenda, journalists must be aware that it is the government which frames the questions and campaigns for a “Yes” vote. News coverage should reflect that. The views of all political parties (and dissenting groups within them) must be accurately reflected.

Reporting the debate is crucial - but not the only way to achieve fairness. Analysis of the practical consequences of a “Yes” or a “No” vote may be a more effective way of informing the audience about the choice before them.

In the formal debate programmes, the broadcaster should ensure that not only are the speakers on the panel a good balance of opposing views, but that the audience represent a fair cross-section of views as well.

The aim of any election coverage is to ensure that the electorate is able to make an informed choice. Voters are entitled to accurate, fair, impartial and balanced information about the election procedures and the positions of political parties/independents and/or candidates on issues.

The Don't Knows and those still making up their minds how to vote should also be reflected in any coverage. The broadcaster should seek out ways of giving a voice to alternative views not expressed by those campaigning for either “Yes” or “No”.

Implementing Guidelines

- Develop editorial codes and ensure journalists are fully familiar with them.
- Ensure proper planning and resources for election coverage.
- Ensure that staff are fully familiar with electoral law in their country and comply with all electoral legislation and regulations.
- Get the code agreed in advance with the Ministry of Information, the political parties, and the Election Authority, and publish it, including on your station's website.

The Responsibilities of the Authorities

- Broadcasters need to be able to operate in an environment free of violence and intimidation. They must be free from internal and external censorship. Parties and candidates and others involved in an election must respect the rights of the broadcasters to cover an election freely and fairly.
- The authorities must ensure broadcasters the right to editorial independence.
- They must guarantee the freedom of broadcasters from political, economic, religious and other pressures so they can work in an environment that promotes integrity and credibility.
- They must take all necessary measures to prevent fraud or ballot rigging of any kind.
- They must ensure non discrimination in voter registration, that polling stations are in neutral places, and that the electoral rolls are kept up to date and accessible.
- They must arrange fair and open counting of the vote.