

Election Reporting: Tips & Tricks

To help you cover the Elections better, this chapter is a checklist with practical advice and some handy tips¹.

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Voters must have access to accurate, timely and informed facts and opinions, free from political or economic control.

Journalists play a major part in the expansion and strengthening of democracy and his or her role is even more important in times of political tension.

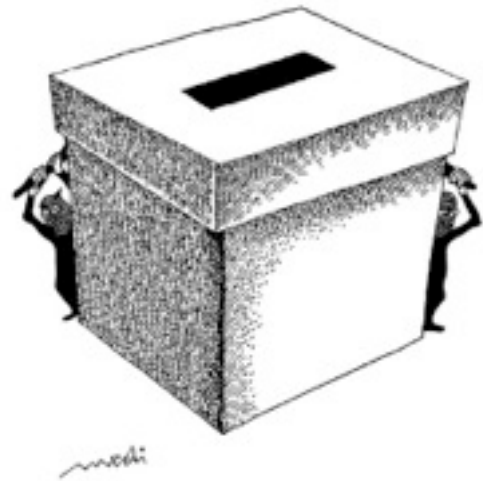
Independent reporters have the professional obligation to cover the elections unbiased and responsible at all times.

¹ Partly based on these 3 Election Reporting handbooks: *Media + Elections, An Elections Reporting Handbook*, by Howard Ross / IMPACS 2004; *Election Reporting Handbook*, by International Federation of Journalists / IFJ 2008; *Handbook for Journalists during Elections*, Reporters without Borders / RSF, 2000

Election Reporting Checklist

Planning is essential to effective election coverage. The 50 bullets on the next pages can be used as a checklist by the election task force and editors. It's probably not complete, but does provide guidance on preparations and special editorial approaches to the campaign².

1 **Transition Elections:** in countries like Myanmar, going through a period of transition, a journalist's role is not simply to cover the political contest. He or she must always focus on whether conditions exist for a free, reliable and transparent election. Without trying to take on the role of police officer, judge or election commissioner, a journalist must keep the public informed of errors, irregularities and abuses he or she has documented.



2 **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).

3 **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).



4 **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.

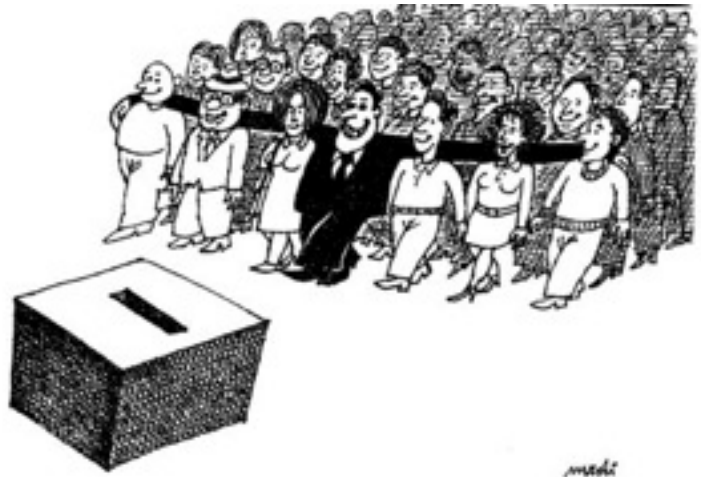
5 Consider setting up an **election media monitoring** group composed of well known personalities and in charge of investigating any aggression against the press and to promptly act upon them.

² Partly based on 'An Editor's Model for Election Coverage' by Jean Paul Marthoz / IFJ

6 **Explain to your audiences** your reporting rules, how you are going to cover the campaign and why.

7 News reports should **never try to tell** voters who to vote for.

8 Election coverage involves everybody. **All departments** need to perform duties according to their skills. Specialized reporters will be commissioned to investigative research (economics, health, peace process etc), others to compare competing political programs, to scrutinize speeches, to track inconsistencies and expose propaganda.



9 The election campaign should never blur **the rest of the news**. There should always be sufficient staff reporting on everything but the elections.

10 Remain **editorially independent, resisting all political, social and financial pressures** designed to affect coverage. The only guidance should come from editors, and from an individual's ethical sense. The outreach department should get precise guidelines to acceptance and placement of political advertising.

11 Recruit additional **freelance personnel**: you'll need increasing more young journalists (interns), translators, technical (ICT) support, drivers, etc.



12 Ensure that all parties and candidates are given **equal voice** in the media. Cover the views of all political competitors in reporting on programs and debates, without allowing personal opinion to tilt coverage.

13 **Select political experts**, they will be of much help to give meaningful 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.

- 14 **Do not overwhelm** your audience with excessive punditry. Ordinary citizens should have their say too.
- 15 **Check your video / audio / photo files:** you should have as many material of candidates as possible stored in your library.
- 16 **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).



"On election day, are you more likely to vote for the candidate who gives you a headache or the candidate who gives you a stomachache?"

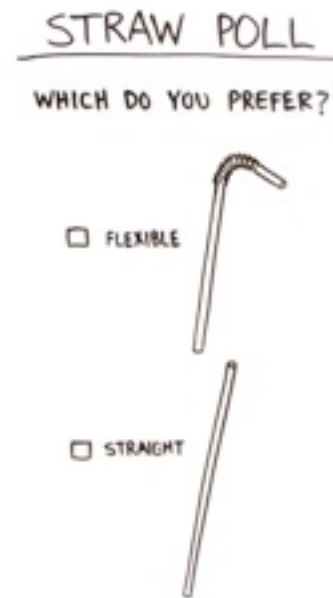
- 17 **Planning is all-important**, but never forget that your first responsibility is to the readers, the viewers and listeners.
- 18 **Citizen's groups** which are formed to help voters use the power which elections put at their disposal are very useful. Take, for example, this advice given by Project Vote Smart in the US to American voters:
 - A) Remember who is in charge. In our democracy the citizen is the boss. Elected officials are temporary hired help
 - B) View the election campaign as the politician's job application.
 - C) Ask yourself if the candidates are giving you, the employer, the information needed to decide who is best for the job.
- 19 **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).
- 20 Introduce an **open line** to viewers so they might ask questions on specific points of the campaign and air their views (by Facebook, Twitter & Mail).
- 21 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.

22 **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 publish 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.

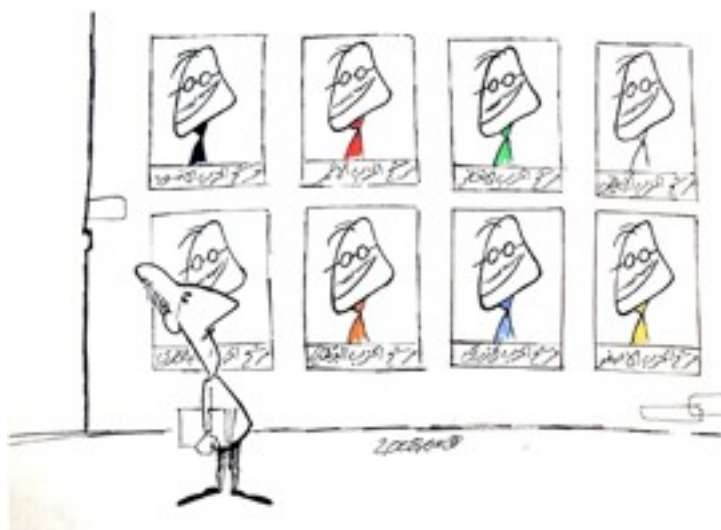
23 **Start well ahead of election day:** prepare profiles of major candidates, close-ups on most electoral districts (economic base, population profile, major problems, party dominance).

24 **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.

25 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.



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26 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.

27 **Understandable language:** make stories and issues accessible to the audience, de-code all political jargon, track down

and annihilate all long words that render already difficult concepts totally incomprehensible.

28 **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 favorable.

- 29 **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.
- 30 **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).



31 Carefully **evaluate voter registration procedures**, ensuring – in cooperation with the appropriate authorities – that the work is carried out properly and transparently, as regards both the signing up of citizens and the updating of voter lists.

32 **Investigate**: research the status of the independent electoral commissions and other national agencies that play a part in the electoral process.

- 33 A **campaign interview** with a politician is a difficult art that demands solid preparation of relevant questions. Make sure to rehearse the questions in advance and get back-up during the interview (with an earpiece).
- 34 **Verify** that the rights and duties listed in campaign codes of conduct are being respected by parties and candidates.
- 35 **Monitor** by visiting many polling stations on election day to ensure that voting and vote-counting are conducted honestly.

36 Be **patience**: avoid publishing or broadcasting election results that have not been officially announced by the electoral commission.

37 **Interpret** and explain precisely the reasons why results have been challenged and the procedure to be followed when appeals are filed.



- 38 Always be conscious of the effects – positive and negative – that information can have. In that spirit, news should be reported in **neutral, unsensational language**. Topics with the potential to heighten tensions should be handled especially carefully.
- 39 Know how to **differentiate** between election irregularities that may result from lack of training or information on the part of election staffers, and those that reflect fraud intended to alter vote results.



40 **Use all forms of journalism:** breaking news, 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, media monitoring and contradictory debates.

- 41 **Open Space:** give politicians from different parties the possibility to write columns for the website 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.
- 42 Get acquainted with **campaign tricks:** beware of stunts and cooked-up events designed just to grab headlines.

43 **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 rumor campaign can lead you far away from voters' real interests. Distinguishing between the official duties of a member of government and his or her activities as political actor is also essential.



- 44 **Be credible:** never forget that your long-term credibility is always at stake. News should be presented in a spirit of modesty, factual precision and skeptical inquiry, not forced conclusions.
- 45 Follow closely each **candidate's advertising campaign.** Some media have columns which scrutinize 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.
- 46 **Tensions:** sharp powers of observation and analysis are essential. These will enable a journalist to grasp the socio-political complexities of a political moment and the issues at stake. A journalist should make every effort to lessen social tensions instead of increasing them – a task in keeping with the profession's fundamental moral standards.
- 47 One of the biggest challenges to journalists covering a campaign is to **stay focused** on the information of greatest use to voters. A journalist should take precautions, both in handling information and in ensuring his or her own safety.
- 48 **Take the pulse of public opinion,** whether formally on the job or not, a journalist should always ask people what is going on in the streets, tea houses, markets, offices, family gatherings – in all the spaces where citizens discuss politics.
- 49 **Report the views of** minority-group representatives, unions, professional associations, women's groups and human rights organizations. These all represent interest groups whose points of view and demands should be disseminated by the media.
- 50 **After the election:** review the way your team covered the campaign. Compare your performance with that of the competition.



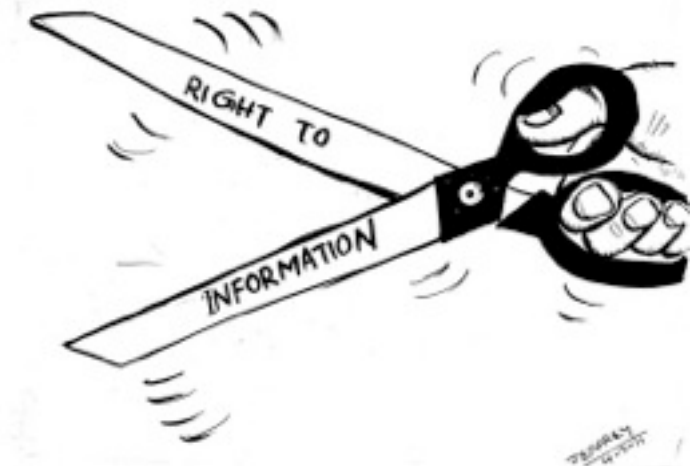
Do it yourself: Extra Reporting Skills

There will always be new journalism techniques to learn, so here are some explanations on skills you may consider picking up.

• Creating video and audio stories

As video and audio editing technology becomes more streamlined it is always worth keeping up to date with new options and techniques it offers. Advice on choosing appropriate equipment can be found on many amateur sites, and purchasing extras, like tripod stands, allows you to make notes about possible highlights or edit points while you record. Editing the recording down to an appropriate length and removing any unnecessary

digressions is by far the most time-consuming part of the process, and one that you can only learn through practice. Not every story will necessarily need a video or audio component, however. Deciding which stories would most benefit from one is another essential skill for a modern journalist.



• Crowd sourcing



Social media is an immensely powerful tool for discovering and curating stories, but

the process can be fraught with the dangers of libel and copyright law.

Reading up on how best to engage with online communities to source stories is a great way to learn the theory, but identifying superusers and community nodes is a skill that requires practical experience.

It is also worth learning how to quickly verify pictures and posts made on social media. This can be done by simply conducting a reverse image search or some image level analysis to prove a picture is real, through to more complicated techniques like examining geolocation and EXIF data to verify time and location of a tweet. Such checks are vital, since repeating a false story will do damage to your credibility.

• Basic Coding

A journalist who can write both engaging copy and working code has significant value in a modern newsroom. Basic knowledge of how to edit HTML and CSS means a journalist can make their story look slick and is almost always required for

subbing copy online. Beyond that, knowledge of other advanced programming languages allow a journalist to create info-graphics which are very different from those created using old standards like Infogram, Datawrapper and Code Academy some of many free resources that can help get you started with coding.

• **Content management and SEO**

There is no use publishing to avoid attracting readers to an article through effective use of content management systems and search engine optimization (SEO) are vital skills in a modern newsroom (that is often neglected by journalism courses). Many CMS offer SEO checkers, but the knowledge of how search engines pick up and promote stories is a valuable thing to gain for yourself.



• **Statistics and Data**

Data stories are increasingly making the front pages as more information is stored electronically and made readily accessible. Interpreting the regular releases of data and creating a story from them is a skill in itself, but cleaning and organizing huge spreadsheets into easily readable segments is well within the capabilities of a modern journalist. Statisticians seem especially keen to pass on their knowledge, so books that teach you how to interpret data aren't hard to come by.

• **Scraping**

For when data isn't readily available, or is spread over a variety of locations, learning to 'scrape' that information from relevant sources is an especially useful tool for a data journalist. Sometimes called web harvesting, the process involves creating a formula that grabs the relevant information from each source you specify. Thankfully, there are a number of free tools and guides available, like the Google Chrome app Web Scraper, this guide from School of Data, and services like Import.io. Once you have learned the basic techniques, or how to use scraping tools like Outwit Hub, a competent scraper saves a tremendous amount of time.

• **Data Visualization**

It's one thing to have discovered a story in a data release and quite another to effectively communicate that story. Great data visualizations immediately communicate the facts of the story in a way that plain text could not. Beyond the basics of Datawrapper, tools like Tableau Public, Quartz's Chartbuilder or Raw are hugely flexible ways of creating those immediately arresting info graphics, and mapping software such as CartoDB or Google's Fusion Tables allow for the creation of striking point- and heat-maps that illustrate global inequalities. Since each tool has a different back-end and a variety of options, it takes practice to learn how to use them all effectively and choose the most appropriate one for your data.

This crowd sourced list is based on an article by journalism.co.uk with the most useful skills you should learn for yourself to professionally cover elections.