



Covering elections

Media making their mark at election time

The guide provides concise advice and guidelines for editors organising their newsrooms to report on an election, ranging from budgeting for coverage to engaging with different sections of society during the campaign. It also offers tips to journalists on how to stay on top of the 24-hour newsroom and social media when reporting on an election campaign.

Elections are a mix of rules and chaos, predictable events and surprises. Make sure to plan early and seriously enough so that you'll be able to address the inevitable rollercoaster and ups and downs of the campaign.

The Bali Media Forum process: promoting ethics in election coverage

by Bettina Peters, Thomson Foundation

In 2013 the Bali Media Forum focused on ethics in election coverage and the 70 editors, journalists and media experts from 24 countries agreed two practical proposals to support ethical election coverage, especially in the upcoming elections in Indonesia.



Media organisations, editors and journalists' groups should work together to define a common approach on how to cover the election, including agreement to:

- seek guarantees from government and political parties about safety and security of journalists;
- avoid all attempts to manipulate media or use corrupt processes, such as paid-for journalism, to distort coverage; and
- establish common standards of reporting that will
- confront and eliminate all forms of political speech that is hateful or inciting violence

In particular, election coverage training is crucial for media to be prepared for free, independent, inclusive and tolerant coverage.

Such training should:

- put ethical standards at the heart of any course and use the best training modules and approaches available;
- focus on the dangers of hate-speech and the threats posed by sectarianism and extremism;
- involve editors and provide specific advice and training for them to prepare for the elections;
- ensure that media fully involve and engage with the public;
- be organised in advance and during the election period as part of a strategic programme involving all relevant groups in the journalistic community.

“Government must avoid imposing forms of regulation that may curb independence of journalism”

Underpinning the advice offered is the following statement adopted by the first Bali Media Forum and reiterated by participants in the following forums:

- That building democracy and creating the conditions for social and economic development requires the rule of law, a community of citizens that is fully informed, and systems of governance that enjoy public trust
- That creating an environment to ensure free media and independent journalism, without any form of legal or political pressure, must be a priority for all governments committed to democracy
- That government should support the creation of transparent, professional and independent forms of media accountability to:
 - o **advocate** and campaign for press freedom and good governance in media
 - o **contribute** to education within society on the role of free media in democracy
 - o **mediate** problems that arise between media and their audience
 - o **promote** access to public information and to information technology that will ensure the full participation of citizens in democratic society

Government must avoid imposing forms of regulation that may curb independence of journalism and must protect and nourish the rights of media and the information rights of citizens and journalists, including free expression and freedom of association.

Even though different codes of ethics, different media laws and different cultural traditions exist throughout the region, journalists were guided by generally accepted principles summed up as:

- o **tell the truth**
- o **be independent**
- o **strive for impartiality**
- o **minimise harm**
- o **be accountable**

Tips for editors and reporters to stay on top of the 24/7 newsroom

Edited by Bettina Peters, senior development consultant, Thomson Foundation. Contributions from Jean Paul Marthoz, Aidan White, Ethical Journalism Network and the Poynter Institute

If fixed deadlines are still major milestones for traditional media the rise of the internet and the proliferation of social media have turned campaign reporting into a 24-hour-a-day challenge with a myriad of 'news actors' anxious to have their say.

All media are in the race for instant news delivery, which means that they have to integrate traditional and online news operations. Planning therefore is crucial.

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1

Monitor the social media universe

Social media act as early warning indicators, sources of breaking news, fact-checkers, rumour-mongers and act as a public agora, a meeting place for expression of ideas. Appoint a social media editor and a team of social media reporters who will monitor all the websites potentially providing information in words, sounds and video about the issues, the personalities or the mood of the country.

Reporters have to be trained in data mining and in verification techniques specifically tailored to social media's frenzied tempo.

Following the candidates' own social media as they increasingly use Twitter or Facebook as campaigning tools. Analyse their discourse, compare them with their rivals and check their popularity (or lack thereof).

Publish regular updates on the social media scene:

- highlighting the "buzzes" and what's trending
- tallying the figures about political candidates' "friends"
- checking the number of likes on more specific issues or policies
- dissecting the social network connections that might say something about a candidate's real affiliations and opinions
- analysing the contents of popular retweets

But take care. Social media may be a tool to collect news but it's also a source of rumours, lies and hatred. Comments should be independently and rigorously verified. They are not scientific polls. Be careful not to trust social media predictions of electoral results. But they can provide interesting tips, alerts, quotes, profiles, reactions and connections.

2

Online journalism

Journalism is increasingly online, even in traditional media. The internet provides infinite opportunities for reporting, commenting and interacting with the public.

Your website should become a “one-stop” site where the public can be informed, educated and, yes, at times entertained. The website should offer the whole gamut of journalistic skills, forms and values:

- Practical citizen-orientated information: a calendar of the electoral process, a citizen-focused educational tool on the voting process (registration, voting procedures, voters’ rights, etc), background on different issues, candidates’ verbatim statements, reference documents, etc.
- Updates and permanent reporting on the major events of the campaign, for instance via the journalists’ own tweets and user-generated content.
- Opinions and debates: the web provides a fantastic opportunity to open up the space dedicated to guest opinions and the public’s interaction.

You can invite citizen bloggers based on their talent, their adherence to fundamental journalistic standards and especially their capacity to provide an original point of view, speaking for instance from a “forgotten part of the country”, from a particular profession, etc. You can also publish abstracts and quotes from other media opinion writers or select quotes from public speeches, Twitter feeds, radio and TV interviews.

Lighten up. Election is a serious business but you can educate the public by resorting to formats that are closer to entertainment and games than to traditional “civic education”. Voters for instance may be invited to test their preferences of knowledge in online surveys. Be careful, however, to respect strict criteria while devising these tests and to offer confidentiality to the people doing the test. Don’t go too far either in what might become an avatar of infotainment. Entertain but don’t trivialise.

3

The old hack’s tips

Understand the issues. Don’t let your journalists become megaphones or stenographers of political candidates talk. Avoid “he said/she said” journalism and act as an umpire and steward of the electoral race. Cover all issues independently from party positions. Don’t just present issues as a conflict between opposing sides but as subjects of serious debate.

Always ask. What’s missing in the news today? Have we been inclusive? Report on issues that are neglected by political parties. Report on social groups that are usually invisible in the media. Do not limit your coverage to the star politicians. Major parties obviously demand more attention but smaller parties need to be given a voice, out of fairness and if they have something newsworthy to say. Often they raise important issues that are neglected or swept under the carpet by the major parties.

Do not be afraid of repeating the basics of difficult issues. The “We’ve already done it” or “It does not interest anybody” cynicism should never be welcome in a newsroom.

Clarify. Make stories and issues accessible to your audience, demystify and decode political jargon, track down and annihilate all long words and acronyms that render already difficult concepts totally incomprehensible.

Beware of “pack” journalism. This often leads reporters 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 or when a controversy, however trivial, rocks the campaign.

Expose political spin. Analyse campaign strategies, political advertising, stunts and tricks. Scrutinise campaign promises. Dissect advertising techniques. Check parties’ press releases and statements. Expose approximation, falsification and distortion.

Track broken promises and inconsistencies. Remember what the candidates said (and did) over a period of years not just days.

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)? Examine possible conflicts of interest. Who wins and who loses is an important question on any policy proposal.

Do not overhype controversy. A contrived rumour campaign can lead you far away from voters’ real interests. Because someone says something outrageous does not make it newsworthy. Examine the status and importance of who is speaking and the context in which it is made.

Finally, when the votes are being counted, do not rush to judgement. On election night, be careful not to make too much of the first returns. The history of election reporting is full of anecdotes on some media announcing prematurely the (wrong) results and being ashamed for years to come. Make your mark by being accurate, reliable and building trust with all parties and the voters.

4

Social media as a source for news

Follow every link back through the web to its source and evaluate the original material. This is the single most important thing you can do.

Don’t retweet links you haven’t clicked. Don’t do this from sources you know, and don’t do it from sources you don’t know.

If you follow the chain of information back as far as it goes, as often as you can, you’ll be more accurate, and more interesting. For example, very often a link will go to an aggregation of a story that links to another original piece that contains additional information or has a different emphasis. That original report may be more important and worth sharing than the thing you’d first considered retweeting, which summarised it.

The whole point of blogging and a certain kind of news tweeting is to assert individual editorial judgement over the roiling internet and represent information in a new way. Bloggers often make news by taking someone else’s 15th paragraph and making it their lead, providing new avenues for storytelling and reporting. That’s not curation, that’s an assertion of news judgement.

Tweeting is akin to that. Reporters tweeting pieces of their own will tweet their headlines. But sometimes an interesting piece of news is down deep in the article and someone else will pick that up.

The corollary of this for visual media is to **do not tweet or retweet a video you haven't watched.** And if you're aggregating from a video, never use the quotes someone else has in their story about what was said in the video. Watch the video yourself, you may find inconsistencies and mistakes. Sometimes someone has edited from raw material into story form, making a decision about what not to include for space or emphasis reasons, and sometimes it's because reporters are human, too.

No matter how well-trained they are, or how prestigious the outlet where they work, humans can make mistakes, especially when they are working fast and for an editorial product with a thin editing structure. You can protect yourself from repeating other people's mistakes by confirming everything you can against available original video sources yourself.

Consider the source. If you've never heard of someone, you can Google their Twitter handle without the @ sign and you'll often get a real identity, as people tend to use the same handles in more than one place. From there you can get a biography and begin to evaluate credibility. If someone appears to have been a troll before they began news tweeting, approach their news tweets sceptically, they may still be trolling. Also, if someone is purportedly tweeting news about an official agency they appear to have no relationship to, compare that information to tweets coming from the agency in question. If there's no confirmation from the agency, be sceptical.

Finally, just because a major media organisation has tweeted something doesn't make it true. Sometimes media outlets are themselves aggregating something from somewhere else; this is why it's important to follow the chain of information back to the original source, if you can.

Spotting fake accounts. Here are some tips for identifying fake and/or anonymous accounts when covering the election:

- Look at the Twitter bio. If there's not a name associated with it, be cautious.
- If a location is indicated in the bio, consider whether the information lines up. If the bio says the person behind the account is located in Bandung, and they're tweeting photos of breaking news in Banda Aceh, that should raise a red flag.
- If you're curious about an account's tweets, try DM'ing or @'ing the person behind it to find out more.
- Be especially skeptical of tweets that say "BREAKING NEWS" or use journalistic language if they're not from a journalist or a news organisation.
- Bottom line: do some quick research before spreading information from an account you're not familiar with.

Misinterpreting social media sentiment. When tracking political events on social networks, it's easy to draw conclusions about what the posts mean. Avoid doing this when covering the election, and remember that not everyone uses social networking sites.

Moving too quickly. The news cycle is more accelerated than ever, largely because of social media. Some news organisations that have moved too quickly in the past have spread misinformation during major news stories.

When you start to hear news about winning candidates, ask yourself: where is this information coming from, and how do I know it's true? You can let your audience know you're in the loop by tweeting/posting something along these lines: "X is reporting Y, but we haven't yet confirmed the reports." Or, "We are working on this story and will tweet updates as soon as we have them." Or, "Here's what we do know...". This will send a message to your audience that you are committed to accuracy.

Failing to correct errors on social media. If you do spread misinformation online, take steps to correct it. Data has shown that incorrect information travels faster on Twitter than corrections. Because Twitter doesn't have a correction tool, it's up to journalists and news organisations to correct the information and make sure as many people see it as possible.

Tweet the corrected information more than once, and use Topsy or WhoTweetedMe.com to identify the most influential people who tweeted the incorrect information. Reach out to them on Twitter and let them know about the correction so they can help spread the word about it. Also, make sure to correct errors not just on social media, but on all platforms where the news circulated.

The digital challenge in the 24/7 newsroom

by Jean Paul Marthoz

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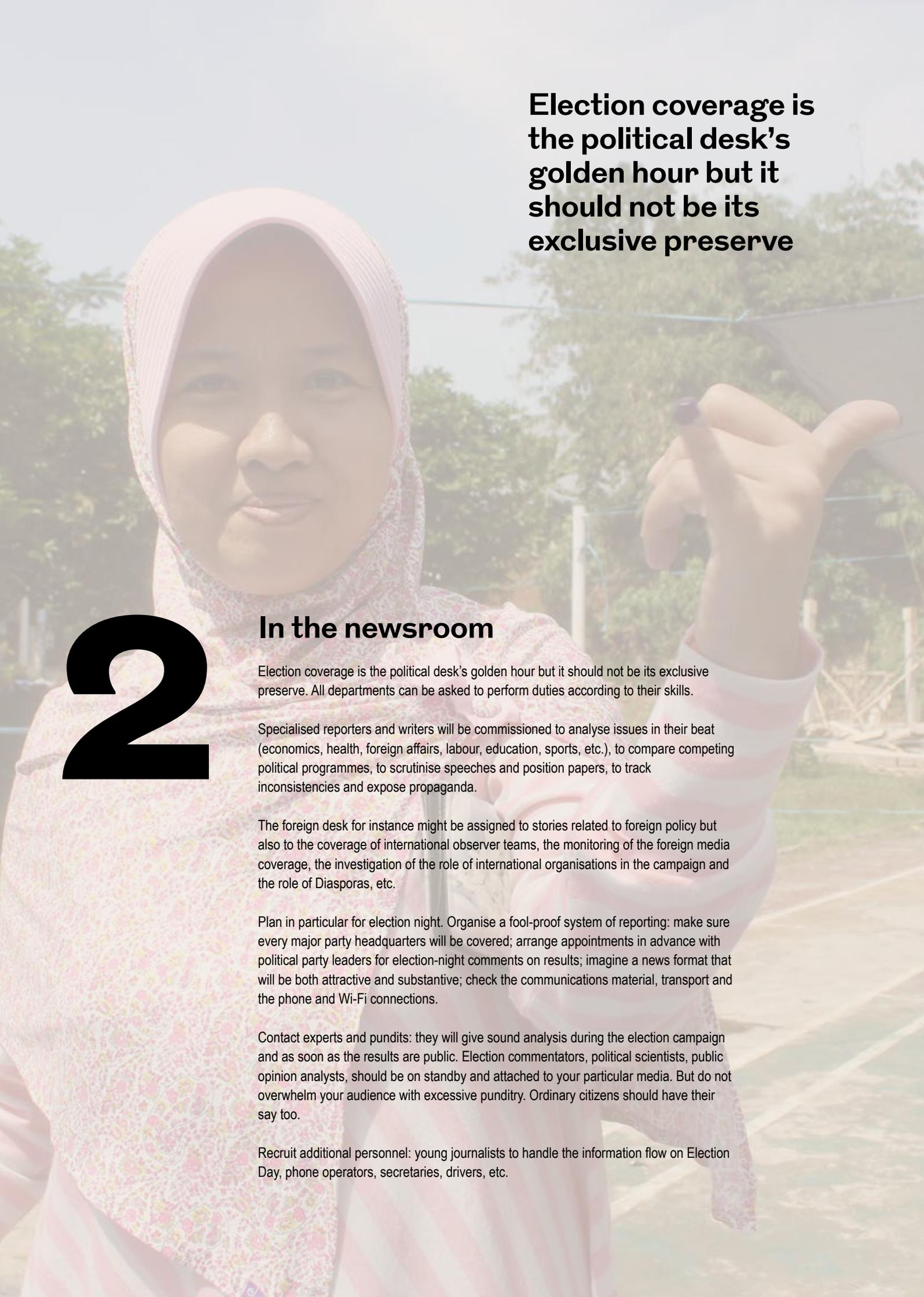


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1

Planning

- Check with the electoral commission on all the details of the coming poll: registration date, start and closing day of the campaign period, election-day specifics (how polling will be organised, timetable for election returns, etc.).
- Study the election rules related to:
 - The voting system, electoral laws, and poll watching rules;
 - The use of public opinion surveys (description of the sample, deadline for reporting polling results, etc.);
 - Political advertising;
 - Access to public service media and « fairness and balance » related to public debates and election coverage;
 - Electoral expenses;
 - National and international poll observation;
 - The coverage of campaign news, debates and publication of electoral results by international media.
- Make sure all journalists understand the rules. And train them. So that they can independently verify violations of elections rules without depending on partisan denunciations.
- Make sure your readers understand the rules too. Carefully explain the principles and techniques of campaigning and voting.
- Explain to your public your reporting guidelines and how you are going to cover the campaign and why.



Election coverage is the political desk's golden hour but it should not be its exclusive preserve

2

In the newsroom

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 reporters and writers will be commissioned to analyse issues in their beat (economics, health, foreign affairs, labour, education, sports, etc.), 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 foreign policy but also to the coverage of international observer teams, the monitoring of the foreign media coverage, the investigation of the role of international organisations in the campaign and the role of Diasporas, etc.

Plan in particular for election night. Organise a fool-proof system of reporting: make sure every major party headquarters will be covered; arrange appointments in advance with political party leaders for election-night comments on results; imagine a news format that will be both attractive and substantive; check the communications material, transport and the phone and Wi-Fi connections.

Contact experts and pundits: they will give sound analysis during the election campaign and as soon as the results are public. Election commentators, political scientists, public opinion analysts, should be on standby and attached to your particular media. But do not overwhelm your audience with excessive punditry. Ordinary citizens should have their say too.

Recruit additional personnel: young journalists to handle the information flow on Election Day, phone operators, secretaries, drivers, etc.



3

The nuts and bolts

Plan technical and operational arrangements:

- Work with the production managers: they must provide extra airtime or additional pages on Election Day and production deadlines will be later, they should beef up their reporting teams.
- Pin down the advertising department: some programming or pages should be considered adfree during the campaign; precise guidelines should be given to the placement of political advertising.
- Plan for emergencies: what do you do if something breaks down on your side (your system crashes, your local journalist cannot contact you; one of your reporters is arrested or wounded, etc.)? Or if there's a political meltdown and controversy (failure in the collation of results, charges of irregularities, etc.)?
- "Precook" the campaign predictable output: prepare profiles of major candidates and closeups on most electoral districts (economic base, population profile, major problems, and party dominance); carefully draft the format you'll use to report the results.
- Check your photo, sound and video files on the candidates and the issues of the campaign.

4

Budgeting

Budget for the election reporting: You will need extra phone lines, routers, transmission and mobile capacity, additional cars and drivers, more overtime, etc... Plan carefully and allocate resources wisely. Under-estimating the costs will get you into trouble.

In order to keep costs down you may consider partnering with other non-rival media for commissioning polls, doing investigations, sharing pundits or organizing the election night coverage.

5

Ethics: a reminder

Election reporting is a major test of media ethics. If opinion is free (and in particular for those media that have adopted a clear political preference), facts are sacred.

Honesty in reporting is essential. It requires fairness, the permanent battle for accuracy, the rejection of manipulation, dirty tricks and incitement to hatred as well as a keen sense of responsibility to keep the electoral process open, peaceful, free and fair.

Make sure you are particularly attentive to the voices of the public regarding the quality of your coverage. Assign a “public editor” or ombudsman to hear reactions and complaints. Make sure they are relayed to the editorial staff. They may serve to correct and improve your election reporting.

Beware of conflicts of interest. Double-check your staff’s role (party membership or donations) or potentially compromising activities (participation as panel moderator in party events, training of media skills to candidates, etc.)

6



Revisit your editorial line

Make sure to discuss thoroughly your editorial line well before the election. This process, if neglected, may lead to editorial comments that are fuzzy, confused, simplistic or contradictory over the course of the campaign.

Editorials are “the voice” of your media, they express what you stand for, your core values and they are meant to provide guidance, inspiration, and “stewardship” to the newsroom and the public.

Reminding and restating these principles is essential in order to address the complex and at times controversial or even explosive issues of a campaign. This process should anticipate all potentially difficult questions that will be raised during the campaign. Remember, it’s way too late to learn how to use a fire extinguisher when the flames are engulfing your house. A serious and timely discussion should take place before an issue hits the fan.

Beware: your “bias” may appear in the issues you will emphasise in your reporting. If, for instance, you highlight street insecurity instead of poverty or discrimination you might be seen as promoting a specific political party over others.

A reminder: keep the news section clearly separate from the editorial and allow journalists the freedom to act according to their highest professional standards which require truth seeking, independence and fairness in reporting.

7

Define Op-ed programme and page rules

From the start decide clear rules on who is allowed into (or is banned from) this public space. An independent media organisation should be as pluralistic as possible. But it does not mean that all political actors will be given equal treatment.

For ethical or political motives some media may refuse access to radical organisations while others might opt for a more diverse and at times riskier policy. Others may give more space to bigger parties than to smaller groups.

Be transparent about your Op-ed policy. Explain its norms and criteria to the public. Make a clear spatial or visual distinction between allegedly independent commentary (academics, etc.) and partisan advocacy (lobbyists, party leaders).

Be topical and timely: Some temporary columnists should be invited during the time of the campaign. These might include experts from university or think tanks pundits as well as citizen bloggers and why not, humourists.

8

Engaging with the public

a) Public opinion polling

Public opinion polls are a “must” of election reporting. They are newsy by themselves: people love them and they are also used for political analysis and “think” pieces. Three issues should be kept in mind:

- These polls risk turning the election campaign into a horse race in which “who is first and who’s trailing” may overwhelm more substantive discussions of issues.
- Opinion polls can influence election results. Therefore they should reflect the highest standards of accuracy and fairness and be representative. The media should never publicise them without fully explaining the conditions and the limits of the survey. They should also expose any fraud in surveys released by political parties or other media.
- Never forget that polls cannot replace old-style political reporting. Indeed, opinion polls are too often used as a substitute for traditional journalism and the business of interacting with the public. Make sure you have other channels of communications with the public than formatted polls.

b) Get out of the office and meet the public

Remember the old-style reporter’s mantra: “Get off your back-side and knock on doors “and follow New York Daily News columnist Juan Gonzalez’ advice, “roll down your window” and reach out to the real people without the filter of polling firms and public relations companies.

- Reporting : traditional on the street reporting remains one of the best ways of taking the pulse of the electorate, of identifying issues that polls will not detect, of anchoring political debates in the realities on the ground.

- Reporters should be sent out to very diverse areas (from poor neighbourhoods to luxury condos, from inner city to villages) and interview a very diverse selection of people (from small town teachers to high tech geeks, from farmers to executives). These assignments should involve deep reporting, that is getting the facts and their meaning, and not just vox pops with brief sound-bites from people on the street. It's not enough to open the microphone and camera and put unscripted voices straight on the Web. Take time to talk with the people and to reflect on their comments.

- Street voices: short interviews in the vox pop style are popular but they can be misleading. Do not make them appear as if they were representative of the general public mood; do not make fun of the people you are interviewing; choose them according to their news and opinion value. Do not see them as a “marketing tool” (with the people rushing to see themselves in your media). Do not use them as a sly way to raise or circulate ideas that your media would not dare to express openly.

c) Organise your forums and public access spaces

- Elections are increasingly open to public debate. Forums on the Web, chats, live radio or TV exchanges with the audience often with reactions to journalists' articles are useful, because they give people public access to media, but you should clearly define the rules for the moderation of this interaction.

- In particular there should be clear rules on how to confront and eliminate hate speech from all platforms.

- You should also determine and announce your policy on the anonymity granted to callers of your radio or visitors of your website. Some editors might allow free and unfettered opinions; others prefer a more constrained and respectful dialogue.

- In any case you should prevent the hijacking of your public space by people bent on score-settling, incendiary speech or ad hominem attacks. The reputation and credibility of your media is also determined by the way you manage public access.



d) Involve the public in newsgathering

Ask the public to send you information about election-related events. Appoint a “public reporters’ editor” who will be on the receiving end of the public’s news contributions (different from their opinions). Set up an interns’ desk to contact these “public news gatherers” in order to double-check the information or piggyback on them to get the bigger picture of the issue that has been highlighted.

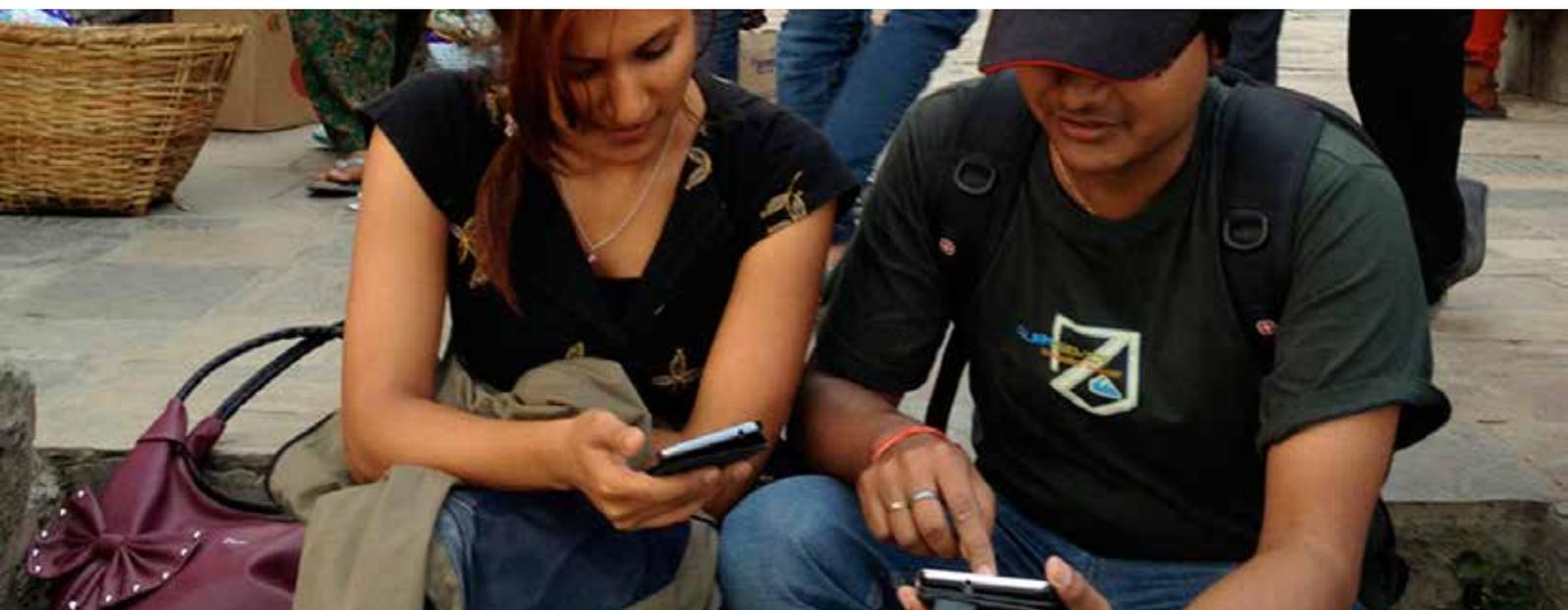
Use social media to improve your collaboration with the public. Citizens can be organized as temporary reporters feeding information from small size or distant events that the press cannot cover properly. This technique requires the wide availability of internet or mobile telephony and rigorous rules of verification and validation of the crowd sourced information.

9

Work with “quasi journalists”

Plan Some NGOs are specialised in monitoring specific aspects of the campaign. Human Rights Watch, for instance, has a team of emergency investigators following potential risks of violence and human rights abuses by all groups. In Kenya the Ushahidi project has relied on an army of citizens monitoring the election process and sending their information to a centralized social platform.

If possible, partner more formally with people who aspire to be citizen journalists to provide top-level information on specific stories. Be careful, however, to keep the control of your editorial policy and not let yourself become an advocate of an advocacy organisation.



Ensure election coverage safety

Election campaigns can be tense and turn violent. Journalists may find themselves trapped between contending groups, be roughed up in street protests or directly targeted because of alleged bias. Risk assessments and security arrangements should be made early in the campaign. Journalists should be duly warned and properly trained. Emergency procedures should be put in place.

Consideration should be given to joining with other media, unions of journalists, publishers' and broadcasters' associations in order to draft a charter to be submitted to all political parties committing them to respect journalists and protect them against harassment by their supporters.

10

An election media monitoring group composed of well-known personalities might also be set up with the mission to investigate any aggression against the press and to promptly act upon them. In many cases this will be done by the independent press or media council.