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## Handbook for journalists during elections

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# HANDBOOK FOR JOURNALISTS DURING ELECTIONS

**REPORTERS  
WITHOUT BORDERS**  
FOR FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

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francophonie

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## Preface

**E**lections may represent an affirmation and consolidation of the democratic process but may also become a threat to peace and stability. The path that each country follows depends to a great extent on the level of commitment to the electoral process of all those with a stake in the outcome – media, government officials, institutions, political parties, civil society and the population at large. A free and fair election does not amount simply to the act of casting a ballot under adequate conditions. Voters must also have access to enough information about the political parties, their candidates and the electoral process to be able to make an informed and responsible choice.

4 An election campaign is an especially sensitive phase in a nation's political life, during which journalists may be targets of intimidation and manipulation, and may be diverted from their mission of informing the public. Pressure and harassment have marked many elections. In other cases, journalists have become mere transmitters of partisan messages and propaganda.

This Handbook for Journalists During Elections was produced by Reporters Without Borders and the International Organization of La Francophonie (OIF) to help journalists assume their responsibilities and cover elections successfully. It is meant for journalists working for media of every category (radio, television, print and online), scale (local, national or international) and form of ownership (state-owned, privately owned or community).

It is vital that journalists be trained and imbued with the appropriate professional and ethical values so that they can transmit fair and balanced information about the candidates, their programmes, and the electoral process. Journalists have to be able to give citizens the tools they need to understand their country, what is at stake in the vote, and help them make their electoral decisions.

As intermediaries between voters, on the one hand, and the candidates and political parties, on the other, journalists play an essential role in transmitting information to both sides. This role must be guided by a search for truth. One erroneous report can distort the outcome of an election.

In some countries, journalists subservient to government may just promote

the ruling party candidate. In others, journalists may fail to set the stage for genuine debate. Instead, they may incite hatred toward a political foe or, because of a lack of technical skills, may misrepresent the relative strengths of the competing forces.

The journalistic profession is governed by rules of conduct and universal ethical principles. This handbook does not simply outline them in theoretical fashion. It applies them to the realities on the ground while taking into account the cultural, political and social environment of each country and the specific characteristics of each election. It also uses examples based on typical real-life cases.

This handbook is meant to be a toolbox providing practical responses to the many questions that underlie all aspects of election coverage. These range from the rules of campaign reporting to the specifics of the voting process: it offers journalists techniques to understand, analyse and fairly transmit news. It enables them to intelligently take on their role of sceptical and independent observers and to have a better grasp of their craft. In so doing, the handbook helps to strengthen the practice of democracy.

The OIF and Reporters Without Borders hold that journalists should have the benefit of solid professional training, legal recognition of their status enabling them to work freely, adequate pay, and appropriate equipment. Journalists need this in order to be able to work properly during normal times as well during elections.

In accordance with the 2000 Bamako Declaration – the first fundamental code of democratic practices, rights and freedoms for francophone countries – the OIF promotes the strengthening of media diversity in order to support peaceful political processes and to implant a democratic culture in these nations.

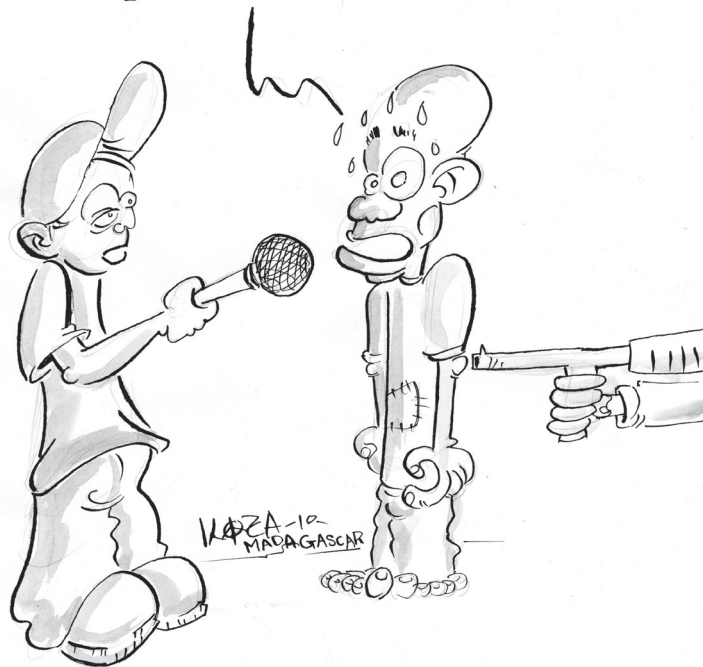
The OIF advocates the decriminalization of media offences and better legal protection for journalists. It also promotes legislation and regulations that favour free expression and the free dissemination of information; supports regulatory bodies that are affiliated to the Francophone Media Regulatory Network (Refram); and encourages self-regulation and professional conduct by journalists. For the most part it takes these positions in the context of elections, political crises or post-crisis situations ■

**Christophe Deloie**  
General Manager of Reporters Without Borders

**Hugo Sada**  
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Democracy and Human Rights

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DE NOTRE  
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## Introduction

Democracy always rests on the right to freely express diverse opinions, and on the votes of well-informed citizens. Media organizations and journalists play a vital role in the electoral process by assuring the dissemination of news and diverse opinions. Media make possible deeper knowledge of candidates, parties and their programs. Journalists contribute to the effective participation of citizens in democratic debate, especially by ensuring that issues of public interest remain at the centre of election campaigns.

As guardians of democracy, journalists also play a key part in ensuring the legitimacy and the acceptance of election results, especially in countries making a transition to democracy or emerging from political crisis

To carry out their task, journalists must have rights. They also have responsibilities. The right to provide information, without being pressured or threatened, brings with it the duty to provide voters with objective, instructive and constructive information. This is complicated work, with challenges to overcome and pitfalls to avoid. Any number of journalists have been sidelined from their mission as neutral and impartial information providers, instead taking partisan positions that can spark violence.

This handbook is designed to help journalists practice their craft to the best of their abilities during political periods that arouse great passion and demand considerable professional sensitivity. The handbook is meant for journalists with news organizations that are operating in varying political, democratic, cultural and social environments. It is meant for journalists with media of every kind (including radio, television, print and online), of every scale (local, national, or international) and every form of ownership (public, private or community).

This handbook is a toolbox providing practical responses to the many questions that arise during elections, and presents examples drawn from real-life cases ■

THE JOURNALISTS LAY DOWN THE RULES  
«SERVE US DRINKS OR NO NEWS GETS REPORTED»

LES JOURNALISTES SONT CLAIRS DÈS LE DÉPART



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# 1. RULES FOR JOURNALISTS

**D**uring an election period, a journalist encounters multiple pressures. They may come from a government, especially in countries in which democracy remains fragile; from political parties, which use various means for obtaining favourable coverage, and on occasion from a superior, or a stockholder or owner of a news organization who is close to a candidate or wants to impose a coverage policy.

Journalists must also resist the pressures of their own opinions, which they should express in the privacy of the voting station, like any other citizen. The public expects journalists to remain above the political fray. They are expected to treat all politicians impartially, regardless of the sympathies or antipathies they may feel toward them.

In resisting pressures and in performing at the level that an election demands, journalists must rely on the ethical principles and moral rules on which their craft rests. No universal charter of these rules exists. Nevertheless, ethical codes are similar from country to country.

All of them define journalism as a continuing search for truth and objectivity. A professional work of journalism must be accurate, verified, balanced, neutral and respectful of human dignity. Implicit in these requirements is a sense of morality and of responsibility as well as the ability to understand opposing points of view, including those that the journalist does not share. Above all, regardless of socio-political circumstances, a journalist's primary responsibility is to his fellow citizens.

The powers of the "fourth estate" do not exist to benefit a government, a political party or any individual. A journalist's only loyalty is to citizens, whom he is responsible for informing. They, for their part, exercise their right to free expression, through the work of journalists.

## 1.1 FREEDOM OF OPINION AND EXPRESSION

Journalists are protected by rights guaranteed in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966, signed and ratified by 154 countries. These rights are also guaranteed by major regional conventions on human rights in Africa, the Americas and Europe. The agreements recognize journalists' right to seek information, to receive it and to disseminate it freely without government interference. Government officials may not harass, intimidate or hinder journalists in the exercise of their responsibilities by any means whatsoever. Governments may not censor journalists or use their resources to unfairly influence them.

### Rights and responsibilities

During an election campaign, a journalist has every right to speak with all parties and candidates. This right extends to parties and politicians who strongly oppose the government and applies to all campaign issues that the journalist considers important for citizens and for the future of the country.

The 1966 covenant recognizes that every individual enjoys freedom of expression. Thus, the right to free expression during political campaigns must be guaranteed to all parties and candidates, as well as to all citizens. This freedom can be expressed through:

- The right of access to media to present programmes and/or to express opinions;
- The exposure of attempts to hinder freedom of expression.

Examples of the latter include a government preventing a candidate from holding a campaign rally, or a political party pressuring a citizen not to reveal first-hand knowledge of election fraud.

### The legality and legitimacy of press restrictions

The 1966 covenant recognizes the existence of a limited number of legitimate justifications for restricting freedom of expression. These arise from the need to protect the rights or the reputations of others,

as well as the safeguarding of national security, of public order, and of public health or morality.

Nevertheless, these restrictions must be strictly regulated, with their range subject to precise limits, by the laws of countries where elections are under way. If vaguely formulated, restrictions can effectively grant censorship powers to a government or to a candidate already in power as regards journalists whose coverage is considered unfavourable.

The law itself may also include illegitimate restrictions. In a country going through a democratic transition, repressive laws inherited from a former regime may still be in force. If a journalist's work is hindered by a legal restriction, he or she should determine if it is legitimate under international law.

- **Example of a legitimate restriction:** censorship to prevent the incitement of racial hatred.
- **Examples of illegitimate restrictions:** prohibition of all information and debate on issues that create difficulties for a candidate running for re-election; barring access to public information under the pretext of safeguarding national security.

As a general rule, laws and regulations concerning information and communication must never hinder journalists' ability to present a range of ideas and opinions that arise in an election campaign.

## Protection of sources

A journalist has a universally recognized right not to reveal a source's name publicly or to the government if that source has demanded anonymity. However, a journalist must be wary of being manipulated into reporting inaccurate information. A journalist must test the reliability of a confidential source by attempting to corroborate his information. For his or her own protection, a journalist may also disclose the source's identity to a superior, while vouching for the source's reliability.

## Safety of journalists

Journalists must be able to work in safety, protected from threats. A journalist must report unsafe conditions as quickly as possible to press organizations and regulatory bodies, and to human rights organizations and government agencies, detailing all threats and attacks targeting him or his colleagues.

In politically volatile countries, a journalist covering an election should not work alone. Members of international or national press associations can accompany journalists, and be notified when serious problems arise.

### An example of an illegitimate press restriction

An army general who took power in a coup d'état comes under strong international pressure to restore democracy to his country. He decides to organize a presidential election in which he will be a candidate, as well as a legislative election with a vote-counting system that guarantees a number of seats to the military.

Media organizations have echoed the protests of some political parties who challenge this system. In response, the military junta enacts a decree prohibiting the press from any reporting on the armed forces, under the pretext of protecting national security.

Journalists decide not to comply, on the grounds that the restriction is illegal under international law. They are arrested and imprisoned for endangering national security. In response, the regional body to which the country belongs suspends all relations with the junta and threatens its leaders with international sanctions.

## Cooperative media regulation

A country's media regulatory system may involve the ministries of communication or justice, and state regulatory agencies, as well as self-regulatory bodies that enjoy Non-Governmental Organization status and are administered by professional journalists.

In normal times, as well as electoral or crisis periods, a cooperative relationship can be established between regulatory and self-regulatory

bodies. This may reflect government support for the privately owned press, or of action taken by media organizations against unethical professional conduct.

### Examples of shared regulation of campaign coverage

In the interest of ensuring neutrality and professionalism in campaign coverage, each regulatory agency, as well as regulatory and self-regulatory bodies, develops a strategy of monitoring and of mutual cooperation.

- The regulatory agency establishes a service to record all radio and television broadcasts and to receive copies of all newspapers. A legal office is assigned to receive and analyse complaints and to propose sanctions, if authorized, to regulatory commissioners. The agency organizes and supervises assignments of broadcast time slots and may organize election coverage training for journalists.
- A self-regulatory body, a media ethics monitoring group, may send representatives to special commissions set up by the regulatory agency to oversee new organizations' practices during the election

International development partners support regulatory and self-regulatory bodies as part of aid programmes to countries that organize free, honest, credible and democratic elections.

## 1.2 THE OBLIGATION TO KEEP VOTERS INFORMED

Article 19 of the Covenant of 1966 guarantees all citizens the right to receive information. During an election campaign, this requires the state to ensure that voters are duly informed of voting procedures and of campaign issues.

The authorities carry out this task largely by organizing information campaigns – billboards, leaflets, public-service announcements in

broadcast media – and by granting radio and television airtime to all parties and candidates. But the moral and professional responsibility to inform voters applies to all journalists, not only those working for state-owned media.

Naturally, this responsibility to inform affects the political environment. Citizens need information from the media in order to better know the candidates, the programmes of the parties and the issues up for debate. But journalists also have a role to play in the electoral education of citizens.

### Contributing to voter education

The journalist must provide citizens with information on voting procedures:

- Who may vote and who may run for office?
- Where, when and how does a citizen register to vote?
- Where, when and how do citizens cast ballots?
- What kind of election is this (legislative, presidential, municipal)?
- What are the positions to which candidates will be elected and what powers and responsibilities will those elected enjoy?

This information is important in all countries, but all the more so in countries in which democracy is new and/or in which many people are barely literate. Journalistic information can help awaken political consciousness and a high level of voter participation. For example, explaining in detail the procedures that guarantee the secrecy of the ballot – thereby preventing retaliation – can calm the fears that some voters have.

These practical guides can take the form of articles on the work of civil society organizations or government agencies specialising in voter education. Stories may also report on citizens' understanding of different aspects of the election process, perhaps showing the aspects that need further attention.

The dissemination of these stories demand serious advance preparation by journalists.

## Effective presentation

News has to be understood by its audience. A journalist must remember that an electoral process raises complex problems and issues. Articles must always be made accessible to the greatest number of people. A journalist is not a university professor. He or she is someone who can explain complex problems in simple language.

Principles of presentation include:

- A good journalist can say a lot in very few words, while a less capable journalist uses many words to say very little.
- Use short sentences with one idea per sentence.
- Prepare an outline before writing an in-depth story. An outline allows the reporter to precisely define an event or an issue, and to find the most effective method of recounting or explaining it. An outline also allows the reporter to identify the most important elements of a story and to decide on the best order in which to present them so that the article is as logical and clear as possible.

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### When lack of voter education leads to post-election violence

Legislative elections with very complicated voting procedures take place in a country with a very high illiteracy rate. Voters must cast two ballot envelopes, one white and one black, in two different urns. The white envelope must contain the ballot of the party that the voter chooses. The black envelope is for the ballots of parties that the voter rejects.

The government, civil society groups and the media have devoted little time and resources to voter education. On election day, numerous irregularities are documented, because a large number of voters don't know the procedures.

The ruling party is declared the winner. The opposition challenges the outcome. This challenge plunges the country into political crisis and sets in motion a cycle of post-election violence.

## 1.3 ACCURACY AND VERIFICATION

A fundamental principle of journalism is that all information in a news article must be completely accurate. This requires great professional discipline in all circumstances, and especially during election times. A journalist must search for truth and recount it as completely as possible while exercising a critical sense that demands systematic confirmation of all facts in the article. To be considered reliable, information must meet the following conditions:

- The information must be determined to be true, not false. Manipulation, disinformation and spreading of rumours are common practices in electoral periods. Never assume that information is true. Other sources must confirm it.
- If doubt exists, the most prudent course is to withhold the information. Do not rely on grammatical constructions to imply doubt.
- Every element of a news article must be accurate: the events, the dates, the places, the quotes, etc. One error in one basic fact can cast doubt on the accuracy of an entire article.
- When a journalist realizes, or is informed, that he has used inaccurate information, he must correct it rapidly and with the same prominence given to the original article.

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### Information from a known source

Cite sources as often as possible. This is simply a matter of answering the question: "Who is speaking?" and giving the person's name and title (candidate, party leader, party activist or ordinary citizen) as the source of a piece of information.

- An election article built entirely on anonymous sources will be considered suspect and unreliable. This method should be avoided in all cases.
- Always ask a source why he demands anonymity, especially when he is passing information that is sensitive or likely to harm the reputation of an individual, a candidate or a party. Carefully assess the source's reasons for anonymity. If they seem legitimate (fears for his safety, for instance), the information should be considered for use. But first the journalist must get confirmation from independent sources. An

anonymous source should never be simply a device to report rumours or unfounded accusations.

### Keeping information precise and in context

- Be precise. In coverage of a rally, describe the place, the quality of organization, the issues addressed in the speech and the crowd's responses.
- The basic requirement for all stories is to answer the questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why?
- Imprecision can distort facts. For example, a journalist who writes or says, "Candidate X's speech was heavily applauded," also has to report whether the crowd is made up of the candidate's supporters, or of ordinary citizens who have come to find out about the candidate. In the first case, the applause was foreseeable. In the second case, the show of support could show that the candidate has won over previously undecided voters.
- Mistakes are always possible. Because of that, the journalist covering a story should always be careful in his or her assessments and avoid definitive judgements. Approaching an assignment with modesty and discipline is the best way to avoid errors.
- Keep all sound and video recordings to back up reporting.

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#### A rumour disrupts an election

An election is taking place in a country where a rebel movement calls a boycott of the vote. The day before the election, a journalist learns from an anonymous source that a grenade has been thrown at a voting station in a far-off area. The journalist reports this information without having verified it and without naming a source.

The next day, all media use the story except for a local radio station whose reporter goes to the village in question and announces that no attack occurred.

But the harm has already been done. A climate of fear has taken hold throughout the country, leading many citizens to stay away from voting stations.

## 1.4 BALANCE, NEUTRALITY AND HONESTY

A journalist must report on party programmes and on debates between the parties or candidates, so that citizens may compare them. But professional reporting must never tell citizens who the best choice would be. A journalist should leave that job to editorial writers and commentators.

### Distinguishing between facts and commentary

Subjectivity is essential to editorials and commentary, in which a journalist (often well known within the profession or to the public at large) sets out an analysis or an interpretation of facts which represent only his own views or those of his news organization. His job is not to report the facts – though accuracy and responsibility are required -- but to give an interpretation, possibly based on a political view.

In other forms of journalism, all professionals are committed to search for facts and report them objectively. A journalist may raise questions, present different points of view and add basic information and context, but always ensure balance and neutrality. The underlying principle is that all parties and candidates are to be treated in fair, impartial and neutral fashion.

### Equal treatment and impartiality

A journalist must devote equal and balanced attention to all parties and candidates. For example, if the building of new roads becomes a major issue during a campaign and he decides to write about it, he should include the positions of all the major candidates and parties.

One way of ensuring impartiality is to provide equal amounts of coverage to each candidate or to each major issue, with each party's position balanced by the others.

**Example 1:** If a journalist reports on a rally during which a party presents the major features of its programme, he or she must report the other parties' responses as soon as they are released.

**Example 2:** If a candidate levels a charge against another candidate

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and the journalist decides to cover the matter, he or she must contact the targeted candidate and include his response in the story. If that candidate refuses to comment, the refusal must be noted.

## Integrity and neutrality

A journalist must not allow his or her own opinions to surface directly or indirectly in coverage or in behaviour.

- It is important to report honestly. Quotes from candidates and party leaders must be reported without alteration and in context. If a journalist is not certain what was meant, he or she must get back in touch with the person for clarification.
- When a translation is necessary (if a candidate has spoken in a local language), extreme care is called for to avoid distorting the meaning of what was said.
- A news story must never be used to support a candidate or party.
- The tone of news stories must be neutral. They should report on differences between the parties but without judging them in any way.
- A news story should never be used to present a personal point of view. Withholding personal views of an article's subject matter is a professional obligation. A journalist's views of a matter must never become part of the story, nor even be mentioned.
- Never wear or carry clothing, badges, stickers or any other item bearing the initials or slogans of a party or candidate.
- Abstain from expressing any kind of opinion of a party or candidate during a rally, during field reporting, or an interview. Express political opinions only in private, preferably with the very closest of friends or family.

## Objectivity and honesty

A journalist is a citizen whose personality and consciousness have been marked by his past, culture, beliefs and education. Nevertheless, he must show objectivity in carrying out all aspects of his work. Complete objectivity may not be possible, but he must take care to be rigorous and honest.

- In gathering and reporting news, a journalist must strive for the greatest amount of objectivity possible, with no subjectivity in the treatment of candidates and parties.

- Writing style, layout and – especially – the choice of photos should not show unfairness or bias for one candidate over another.
- Quotes, camera angles, story placement and broadcast conditions should be managed objectively, or at least honestly.
- Whatever his personal convictions, a journalist must value honesty, in all circumstances.

### The costs of carelessness

A radio station sends a journalist to cover a ruling party campaign rally. At the entrance, party members distribute hats with the party logo. The journalist takes one, to protect himself from the sun. That evening, he broadcasts a balanced piece on the rally. But the next day, a newspaper tied to the opposition runs a photo of him wearing the ruling party's hat and accuses his station of serving the government's interests.

## 1.5 INDEPENDENCE AND HONESTY

Citizens expect the media to report facts honestly and accurately. In keeping with that expectation, a journalist should make a point of remaining non-partisan and resisting political, social or financial pressures to influence coverage. A journalist should take orders only from his or her news organization's superiors. A freelance journalist should be guided by his or her sense of morality and ethics.

### Independence

During elections, a journalist's independence may be threatened in a variety of ways :

**Example 1 :** A news organization's owner is close to a certain candidate and orders the journalists working for him to cover that candidate favourably.

**Example 2 :** The government demands that journalists in a state-owned news organization provide favourable coverage of the ruling party.

**Example 3 :** A journalist working for a privately owned news organization is pressured by the authorities after a highly critical story on the government.

A journalist should resist these pressures to the extent possible, invoking his professional ethics and his responsibility to report honestly and objectively. If need be, he may seek help from local or international journalists' associations. One of their major functions is to help journalists who are being pressured.

## Honesty

A journalist should know how to keep himself or herself independent of the parties and candidates. To be sure, maintaining access to them is important to getting a sense of their personalities and to understanding their political goals. But getting too close to them can make a journalist dependent.

Politicians can be seductive. They may make a show of acting as a journalist's friend. But a journalist should keep in mind that he is simply being used to convey a favourable picture of the politician's personality and programme.

Relations with politicians should be strictly professional, with no pretence of friendship. For this reason, a journalist should never:

- Accept any money, or gift of any value, or any favour that could influence his judgement, create a conflict of interest, or damage his credibility.
- Accept a favour of any kind in exchange for the publication or non-publication of an article. For example, a journalist becomes complicit in electoral trickery if he does not report on known cases of it in exchange for a favour.

## Additional rules of honest conduct

- A journalist may not use improper means to obtain information (such as recording an interview with a candidate without permission).
- A journalist may not spend or receive money in exchange for information.
- A journalist must tell individuals unfamiliar with how media work that what they say may be included in a news report that many people

will see or hear.

- A journalist does not plagiarize, and makes sure to cite the work of colleagues when using their work.
- A journalist credits the photos accompanying his work, whether taken by him or someone else.

## Offers of subsidized travel and similar services

Political parties commonly invite journalists to take advantage of free travel to campaign rallies, where they get free meals as well. Do not accept these offers unless they are extended to all journalists.

The best approach, funds permitting, is to travel on one's own or to share travel costs with other journalists. In addition, a journalist's news organization should pay hotel and meal costs.

Travel paid for by a political party is only acceptable under these conditions:

- When authorized by the electoral commission;
- When all parties transport journalists. If only one does so, because it is the only party that can afford to, the invitation should be refused. The same offers should be made to all news organizations of all persuasions. Consult colleagues to make sure that a number of them have accepted free travel. If they have not, it is better to refuse.
- When the party or candidate does not demand anything in exchange. It is up to a journalist, and to him or her alone, to file a story on the rally, and to decide on the story's angle and content.

A journalist for any news organization should unconditionally refuse any financial offer made on behalf of a candidate or party.

One possible solution to the travel cost problem could be to have independent electoral commissions subsidize travel for reporting teams whose news organizations cannot afford the expense. Regulatory bodies, in cooperation with news organizations and campaign staff in charge of candidates' touring schedules, could be in charge of transporting journalists.

## 1.6 SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Freedom of the press demands responsibility. A journalist is also a citizen and may, even while practicing his profession, play a part in defusing political crises and conflicts. But a journalist is not an average citizen in that his words command attention.

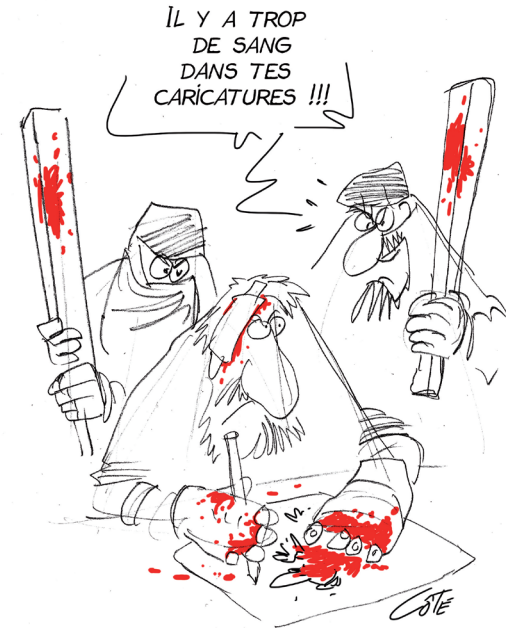
A journalist should always be aware of the positive and negative effects that his work can have. This implies that whatever the subject matter, his words and tone should be as neutral and sober as possible. This also implies the exercise of calm judgement in taking on topics with inflammatory potential, including those that can lead to individuals or groups being stigmatized.

In light of these factors, a journalist should:

- Respect human dignity and the presumption of innocence. He must avoid casting suspicion on anyone's reputation and honour without credible information.
- Respect private lives and personal information and should avoid reporting in this domain except when essential for the understanding of an event or situation in public life.
- Refuse to feed or spread rumours, even if others in the media are doing so.
- Refrain from any discourse that incites hatred, violence, destruction, robbery, intolerance, racism, xenophobia and prejudice.

Journalists who don't respect these rules risk legal sanctions. In the most serious cases, such as that of *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines* in Rwanda, a radio network that preached genocide, journalists have been found guilty of crimes against humanity and convicted by an international court ■

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## How to respond when a party or candidate uses hateful or defamatory rhetoric?

In the midst of an election campaign, parties and candidates often resort to vicious and offensive language against opponents. The dissemination of false rumours and allegations is another frequent tactic designed to weaken foes.

A journalist often has no choice but to report these developments because they can help the voting public understand candidates' personalities. The responsibility for hateful, abusive rhetoric does not lie with a journalist but with the politicians whom a journalist quotes.

All the same, a journalist is professionally obliged to:

- Report these quotes with strict accuracy and attribute them accurately.
- Seek a response from the target of the remarks in order to produce a balanced account.
- Offer no judgement, positive or negative, on what was said or on the response. But a journalist can include the comments of prominent independent figures and/or officials of human rights organizations in order to raise the issue of harm done to the community at large by hateful, abusive or defamatory political rhetoric.

Note that a journalist's sense of social responsibility requires him to take the political environment fully into account. In extremely volatile socio-political situations, when reporting on hate speech that could endanger individuals, communities or the entire nation, one ethical option is to refrain from reporting such comments.

Nevertheless, a journalist can use other professional approaches, such as editorials or columns, to warn politicians and citizens of threats to social peace, and of the divisions that generate conflicts and violence.

Sign on figure at left: *GOVERNMENT*  
Sign on figure at right: *OPPOSITION*



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## 2. THE SPECIFICS OF THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

**C**ountries with well-established democratic traditions are not immune from electoral fraud. Examples include the “ghost voters” registered in several districts of Paris in the municipal elections of 1997, and the challenges to the operation of voting machines in the US presidential election of 2000.

Nevertheless, irregularities are less frequent when parties, citizens, courts, government and the armed forces accept free and fair elections as a basic element of political life.

In the “old democracies,” media coverage of an election focuses essentially on the candidates’ campaigns, on voters’ intentions as revealed in surveys, and on analysis of the election results. Other aspects of the electoral process, such as voter registration or procedures to guarantee transparency, are rarely covered. One notable exception is electoral redistricting, when the majority party is suspected of redrawing electoral maps in order to influence future elections.

The situation is fundamentally different in emerging democracies, in countries in transition to democracy, or countries rebuilding themselves after an armed conflict or a long spell of authoritarian rule. Electoral institutions, established to guarantee the reliability and legitimacy of the results, are often fragile and may be vulnerable to political pressure and to systematic election fraud. Accusations of fraud and embezzlement, concerning electoral procedures themselves or candidates’ campaigns, are frequently made when results are contested. These allegations often set off post-election disturbances.

In this setting, a journalist has an important role to play. Without trying to take the place of police, the courts or election-regulating agencies, a journalist should focus throughout the electoral period on whether a free, fair and transparent election is possible. Professional responsibilities require him to report errors, irregularities and abuses that he has found, especially when these have been pointed out by credible or authoritative sources. Election coverage demands solid knowledge of election laws.

## 2.1 THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitutions of most developing democracies include the international standards for elections defined by the United Nations in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These treaties specify that each citizen has the right to participate in elections as voter and/or candidate. And the voting process must be universal, equal, and free, with each ballot cast in secret.

But in drafting election laws, some countries may interpret these requirements in a way that violates their spirit and conceals the intentions of their political leaders.

Even though a journalist is not a judge or police officer, but a witness and a reporter of the words and deeds of political, economic, and social actors during elections, special attention should be paid to the two following issues:

### Eligibility requirements for candidates

Do the eligibility conditions seem reasonable? For example, setting a minimum age to run for office is generally considered legitimate. Likewise, the candidacy of people holding certain offices may be rejected if their election could cause a conflict of interests (for instance, military officers, or a judge in a case involving the holder of the office he seeks). However, no candidate may be rejected because of ethnic affiliation, gender, religion, education or political opinions.

Other important issues:

- May all candidates, especially independents, stand for election?
- Does the process for determining eligibility involve delays or financial requirements that may give some candidates an advantage over others?
- Has the citizenship standard been revised so as to exclude certain candidates?
- Were people who were ruled ineligible because of a court conviction given a fair trial, or was their conviction obviously intended to exclude them from political life?

## Equity in electoral apportionment

Election apportionment means setting the boundaries of election districts. These must be revised periodically to reflect demographic changes and to avoid big population discrepancies between districts. But apportionment can also be used to distort an election result, especially when the task is assigned to parliament, where the ruling party is by definition in the majority. Rewriting election rules to favour one's own side is a common practice.

Journalists should be on the watch for three frequently used techniques:

- **Dividing electoral strongholds** into numerous little districts in order to facilitate the election of a big number of candidates by a small number of voters.
- **Establishing big districts** in regions where opposition parties are strong, in order to keep their representation as low as possible.
- **Apportioning districts with** many voters, where the ruling party can win with a slender majority. In this method, a district is designed to include a certain percentage of voters believed to side with the opposition; not enough of them to win but a sufficient number to ensure that opposition strength is diluted, depriving the opposition of the chance to have its candidates elected in neighbouring districts.

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### An election law designed to exclude an adversary

An opposition party leader in a country long ruled by an authoritarian regime has resigned from the top post of his party in preparation for running in the next presidential election. Several months before the vote, parliament enacts an amendment to the election law restricting presidential eligibility to the top leader of each party. The amendment specifies that only party chiefs, who hold their positions at the time the amendment is adopted, will be able to run in the forthcoming presidential election.

## 2.2 VOTER REGISTRATION

Voter registration consists of drawing up election-day voter lists by gathering the names of all citizens eligible to vote. Under the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, registration procedures should be as simple as possible and registration sites should be easily accessible to all citizens. In multilingual societies, information should be available in all official languages named in the constitution, as well as minority-group languages.

The drawing up of voter lists, registration and re-registration may pose genuine technical difficulties, especially in countries that have suffered crises involving major population shifts. Voters should be registered in their new places of residence, with their registrations at previous locations removed from the list.

Maintaining an up-to-date voter list is also a tool against fraud based on use of multiple registration of individual voters, or deceased peoples' names. These abuses, generally speaking, are committed by ruling parties, which can count on help at the local level in drawing up invalid voter lists.

A journalist should carefully evaluate the voter registration process. He should verify, with the support of authorities in charge, whether the process is transparent and valid, both in the verification of voter eligibility and in the updating of voter lists.

### Voter eligibility

- All citizens of a country have the right to vote if they meet eligibility standards. These include having reached the proper age, and not having been excluded by local election officials for reasons of mental incapacity or legal ineligibility.
- In the case of a country that prohibits voting by dual-nationality citizens, or expatriates, a journalist should verify that standards of citizenship and residence have not been altered before the vote in order to eliminate presumably oppositionist votes.

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- Imprisonment following conviction of a crime may sometimes serve as the basis for denying voter eligibility.
- Citizens may not legally be excluded from voting because of gender, race, ethnic origin, political opinion, religion, language, illiteracy, property ownership status, or inability to pay registration fees.

### Updating of voter lists

A journalist should pay special attention to the following procedures when current lists of registered voters are drawn up:

- The names of all eligible citizens should be listed.
- The names of deceased persons should be removed.
- A voter should appear on only one list, not on several.
- Election law should allow for the participation of voters whose names do not appear on the list, but who present proof of identity.
- Registration procedures, including deadlines, should be identical in all regions.
- Mobile registration teams should be deployed in outlying regions.
- An unusually high proportion of newly registered voters in certain regions may indicate fraud.

#### Have minors voted?

A country's registered voter list shows a substantial number of newly registered voters, amounting to an increase of approximately 10 per cent from the previous election.

Forty-five per cent of them are from the north, a ruling party stronghold. And 30 percent are from the central region, where the party also dominates. The remaining 25 per cent are in the south, where the opposition has had its strongest showing in recent elections.

This imbalance is surprising, because the population of the south is about three times those of the north and centre together. The opposition parties suspect the ruling party of having registered minors in the north and centre with the help of government employees.

The allegation is unsupported by evidence, but on election day, observers at voting stations notice a large number of voters who seem to be adolescents from the centre and north.

## 2.3 ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

Most developing democracies have created independent national electoral commissions to ensure transparent and valid elections. In countries that adopt this system, election results should be suspended when fraud is suspected, in order to ensure that the final outcome will not be tainted by the illegitimacy that surrounded past government-administered elections.

Electoral commissions together with the appropriate national institutions organize and run the election process. They verify eligibility standards for voters, parties and candidates, supervise the work of election officials, and that of staff who administer voting stations and count the votes. The commissions also issue election rules (see following page) and ensure that these are enforced through sanctions up to and including the exclusion of a candidate.

These wide-ranging powers demand absolute neutrality on the part of commissions. They are frequently made up of figures from civil society, but some countries have commissions made up of representatives chosen by political parties. No single formula guarantees a commission's independence. Abuses ranging from intimidation to corruption are always possible.

Thus, a journalist should verify that the makeup and functioning of an electoral commission are consistent with its democratic mission. This journalistic task can include:

- **Reporting on a commission and its members.** What is the commission's mandate? What are the qualifications of its members? Have they been involved in politics? Do they have family ties to government or political party officials? Do they have economic interests that may lead them to favour one party over another?
- **Examine a commission's attitude toward candidates and parties.** Have candidates been disqualified during the eligibility verification process? If so, does this decision favour the ruling party or the ou-

tgoing president? Are the election campaign rules applied equally to all parties? Are opposition complaints handled as quickly as those of the ruling party? When the government violates election law, does the commission refer the case to appropriate legal authorities?

- **Verify that a commission has sufficient financial and logistical resources.** Are the budgets and accounting records open to the public? Are election staff adequately trained? The latter point is important because not all irregularities identified during an election necessarily amount to fraud designed to influence the outcome. They may reflect estimates of results by election staff who have not been given sufficient training.

36 The media should investigate the reliability of all mechanisms designed to prevent political manipulation, especially by a ruling party. Example: a country that has drawn up a permanent, automated, biometrically verified, fraud-proof list of registered voters, and mounted a publicity campaign to promote an honest, fair and credible election, suffers an electricity blackout during the relaying of results on election day in areas that the opposition has won in the past.

### A facade of independence

The independent electoral commission of a country holding elections is made up of one judge, five members of the ruling party, five members of the parliamentary opposition, three members of parties not represented in parliament, and three members of civil society. But the members of the extra-parliamentary parties and the civil society representatives are elected by the national assembly, where the ruling party enjoys an absolute majority. Thus it can exercise de facto control over the commission, and consequently over the electoral process, because the commission is authorized to resolve disputes by a vote of its members.

## 2.4 CANDIDATES AND PARTIES

The rights and powers of parties and candidates competing in an election are generally spelled out in a code. Such codes specify election campaign rules down to the smallest detail: length of campaign, financing methods, types of advertising and poster locations, rhetoric and behaviour, procedures for resolving complaints, and so on.

Conduct code contents may vary considerably from one country to another depending on historical, political or social factors. But each code must be consistent with the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees the right of each party and candidate to campaign for office freely, within the limits made necessary by protection of public safety.

A code of conduct is generally drawn up by the parties themselves. They are more likely to respect rules that they have participated in writing and to which they have freely assented. If some parties refuse to follow them, a journalist should try to understand why. If all participants have accepted the code, a journalist's work is to verify that they are followed and respected.

### Rights of parties and candidates

- The right to organize political meetings, and to put up posters, within the limits prescribed by law, should be unrestricted.
- No candidate, nor any member of his or her campaign organization, should suffer threats, harassment, intimidation or attacks.
- No citizens should be threatened or otherwise illegally discouraged from casting ballots.
- Law enforcement agencies must protect, without discrimination, the safety of all candidates and the security of all meeting places.
- The electoral commission must apply election rules equally to all parties and candidates, especially in regard to its treatment of challenges and complaints.

## Responsibilities of parties and candidates

- To not incite violence or threaten public safety.
- To not issue statements that insult other parties or sectors of the population because of ethnic affiliation, gender, religion or social class.
- To not resort to personal attacks based on an opponent's private life.
- To not disrupt events of other parties and candidates, nor vandalize nor distort their symbols, songs and posters.
- To not engage in disguised election advertising before the official start of the campaign.
- To not attempt to buy voters' support with money or gifts.
- To have disciplinary procedures in place to punish members who do not respect the code of conduct.
- To make financing sources public and transparent.
- To not use public resources (e.g. motor vehicles, buildings and the like) for campaign purposes.

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### Buying of votes and support

A country has decided to use fingerprints on election credentials in order to combat election fraud. Machines to record digitized fingerprints of each voting-age citizen have been taken to each part of the country during the year leading up to the election.

When the campaign opens, the ruling party sends activists door to door in the poorest, most illiterate regions of the country. The activists offer money in exchange for votes, explaining that the government will be able to know how they voted by using the biometric machines that were used to produce the credentials.

Many people believe this because voting procedures call for voters to place a finger coated in ink on a photo of one of the candidates printed on the ballot.

## 2.5 FAIR ACCESS TO MEDIA

All parties and candidates competing in an election must enjoy fair access to media. This is a fundamental principle of free, reliable and transparent elections that some emerging democracies apply very strictly.

In most cases, an election commission and/or a media-regulating agency determine how the rule is applied, and how violations may be punished. Journalists must be informed – in fact, must be made part of – the laws and rules concerning the media role in elections.

Fair access does not necessarily mean strictly equal access. In cases in which parties or candidates are very numerous, apportionment of space (in the print media) or airtime (on radio and TV) can be calculated according to their importance.

The criteria most often used are the number of parliamentary seats, the number of members in the government, the percentage of votes received in the previous election, or the number of candidates running in the current election.

But the apportionment can also be negotiated by the parties themselves. This can occur, for example, when results of the prior election have been challenged.

### Access to publicly owned media

Publicly owned media are, legally speaking, a public utility. This status brings with it a strict requirement for fairness. A journalist should make sure that publicly owned media are shielded from government interference. In making that determination, this is the critical factor:

- The apportionment of airtime can be challenged when coverage of the ruling party is broadcast during prime time while other parties are assigned less important time slots.
- Because of its government responsibilities, the ruling party often benefits from greater media coverage than its opponents. But this

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imbalance must be reasonable, and justified by other objective factors.

- Fairness is also gauged by the tone of coverage. Publicly owned media must not express any negative opinions or preferences as regards parties or candidates.
- The fairness principle must be applied to all programmes – news bulletins, interviews, debates and live broadcasts.

### Inequitable coverage by publicly owned media

A country's election law required the state-owned radio broadcaster to provide fairly apportioned coverage of the three main parties competing in legislative elections.

It was decided that half of the airtime during news programmes would be reserved for these three parties and that this would be apportioned as follows: 40 per cent to the ruling party, 40 per cent to the main opposition party, and 20 per cent to the party that came third in the previous election. The radio station did as it was told, but devoted the other half of its news airtime to covering the government, whose officials all belong to the ruling party.

So, in practice, the radio station allocated 70 per cent of its news airtime to the ruling party, and 20 per cent and 10 per cent, respectively, to the other parties.

### Access to privately owned media

Privately owned media are also required to treat all parties and candidates fairly. In some countries, the rules for privately owned media during election campaigns are the same as the ones that apply to public media. In other countries, privately owned media are not governed by election law, above all to protect their editorial independence.

For instance, it is not unreasonable for a privately owned news organization to support a candidate and criticize his opponents. But the news organization must grant a right of reply to his opponents, and must publish or broadcast their responses without charging for the space or airtime.

Moreover, privately owned media are subject during elections to all the ethical rules of journalism including no use of hateful or incendiary rhetoric and no publication or broadcast of biased or defamatory reports. For example, if paid political advertising is permissible, privately owned media must grant the same terms to all parties and candidates that buy advertising – price, time slots, page placement, and so on.

Finally, a journalist should keep in mind that all media, public and private, must respect campaign-silence times, as well as restrictions on reporting of survey results before and during the election, according to schedules set by election commissions.

## 2.6 ELECTION DAY

Voting and vote-counting may give rise to massive and flagrant fraud, including ballot box-stuffing, and falsification of official results. These types of actions have been on the decrease during the past decade, above all because of the increased presence of election observers in voting stations.

Still, the risk remains, and fraud may occur at each stage of the process. Possibilities include threats to voters when they cast their ballots, ballot destruction or adding to vote tallies during counting, switching of ballot boxes during transport to the regional election commission, falsification of regional results before their transmission to the national election commission.

A journalist should ask himself or herself the following questions at each stage of the voting process:

### Voting

- Are there signs of electioneering activity or campaign material inside or near the voting stations? Are there indications of voters being pressured or threatened?

- Are non-authorized people (such as uniformed military) present? If so, are they behaving inappropriately or interfering in the work of election staff?
- Are voting procedures respected? Do election staff appear to understand them? Is ballot secrecy respected? Are ballot boxes correctly sealed? Are there signs of ballot box-stuffing, of multiple votes by the same individuals, or of “carousel” voting (voters using ballots already filled out)?
- Are party representatives present? Has anyone interfered with their role as observers? Have they involved themselves in the work of election staff?

### Vote counting

- Have the ballots been methodically and accurately counted? Have the ballots for each party or candidate been separated correctly and individually counted? Does the number of voters correspond to the number of ballots in the ballot box? Have the unused ballots been stored in a safe place, invalidated or destroyed?
- Have disagreements broken out between election staff? Have they all signed the official record of results? If not, why not? Have copies of the record been given to party representatives and election observers?

### Compiling vote totals

- Have reliable security measures been put in place for the transportation of ballot boxes and voting station records to regional election commissions?
- Do party representatives and election observers have the right to be present during the procedures for compiling vote totals? Has their work been interfered with in any way? Have they received a copy of the voting station record before its transmission to the national election commission?

### Announcement of results

- Have there been unusual delays in the announcement of results?
- Have party representatives been allowed to be present during the

counting of final results?

- Are there differences between the results recorded on election day and the official results at all levels of the election process?

### Post-election challenges

- Have candidates filed appeals against the results? Has enough time been allowed to prepare and file appeals? Are there indications that the agency in charge of resolving election challenges may not be independent? Do the reasons given for invalidating, rejecting or accepting appeals seem reasonable?

## 2.7 ANNOUNCEMENT OF RESULTS

A journalist should treat the announcement of election results carefully. Covered unwisely, this news can generate unrest, especially when parties or candidates had accused each other during the campaign of planning to commit vote fraud. When challenges and appeals are filed, a journalist must explain precisely the reasons for the appeal and the step-by-step details of the appeal process.

The fundamental rule is that a journalist must never publish or broadcast election results before the election commission has officially announced them. In most countries, journalists and news organizations face legal penalties for breaking this rule.

Vote-counting operations should never be broadcast live. And no indications of any kind of where the numbers are headed should be reported. However, journalists may report on the atmosphere within or around the voting station during the count; for instance, how many people are present? Are the procedures required by the election commission being respected?

## Partial results, final results

Depending on the country and its electoral system, the procedures for counting, for compiling totals, and the resolution of challenges (which may require recounts) may take several hours to several weeks. Hence results may be announced gradually, region by region, district by district or voting station by voting station.

A journalist's broadcast of partial results may help reduce the risk of fraud or falsification during the initial count. Nevertheless, these partial results must be based on official proclamations by the presiding officer of a voting station or the local election commission, in accord with election law.

## Surveys and projections of outcome

Exit interviews at polling places have become a common practice in some countries. The goal is to obtain an early sense of the results before these have been officially announced.

But this technique is unreliable by definition because it cannot be known if the people who are questioned tell the truth about how they have voted. Even in the most advanced democracies, reporting of exit poll data is required to be reliable and nonpartisan. In all cases, exit interview results should not be broadcast before the last polling station has closed.

The same care should be taken with the technique of statistical sampling, also known as projection of results. This consists of estimating overall results based on partial results. Media that use this technique should always explain to the method to the public, and clearly state the margin of error.

A news organization should also ensure that the election commission does not prohibit these practices. If they are allowed, media should be aware of what restrictions may apply.

# 2.8 OTHER PARTICIPANTS IN ELECTION OBSERVATION

## Political parties

Political parties monitor each other. They have the right to have representatives present inside polling places on election day. In some countries, election commissions at all levels (local, regional, national) are made up of members chosen by the parties.

Each party representative can point a journalist toward fraud or attempted fraud on the part of opposing parties. A journalist can use such a source, but should treat it with extreme caution given the strong risk of being manipulated.

Each party may attempt to use journalists to relay unfounded rumours about other parties to try to damage them.

## Civil society organizations

National associations and NGOs often organize monitoring projects to oversee the transparency of the election process or to ensure that the public remains informed. A journalist should pay attention to their announcements, their reports and their press conferences.

These may point to possible fraud, irregularities, or shortcomings in election management. But caution is demanded here as well. Not all of these organizations are independent or neutral. Some of them may have covert links to a party or to the government.

## Election observers

Election observation has become an important means of protecting the integrity of elections in emerging democracies. Independent observers help build voters' confidence and help assess the legitimacy of an election.

Election observer missions may be national, regional or international. Some perform their monitoring only on election day, while others follow the entire electoral process. Most observers are prohibited from

disclosing what they have observed to journalists while voting is under way. The observations are compiled in a report which is not made public until the day after the vote.

Nevertheless, some observers may be willing to pass information to journalists on condition of anonymity. A journalist should try to build relationships of trust with observers. They should be assured that their conversations will never be recorded and that their names and those of their organizations will not be mentioned in news reports.

## 2.9 HOW TO RESPOND TO ELECTION FRAUD

Not all irregularities detected during an election process necessarily amount to election fraud. Failure to comply with some procedures in a polling station, for example, may reflect election workers' lack of training and information. A journalist who is witness to the events should try to understand the circumstances in which they occurred.

In-depth coverage is called for if irregularities that could affect the outcome are detected in many polling stations. A journalist who sees only low-level administrative errors might simply notify the election commission.

### Caution and level-headedness

Election fraud consists of irregularities carried out deliberately to alter an election result. A journalist must expose them, but he must do so carefully and thoughtfully, because any inaccuracy on his part could unleash a furious reaction.

Fraud must be verified and confirmed by many sources, and not taken out of context. One case of documented fraud in one district does not invalidate an entire election, which may be taking place entirely normally in other regions. A journalist observes only a tiny part of the process. His or her conclusions have to be considered in

the light of what other journalists have observed. Only that way can journalists adequately assess the scale of irregularities and their effect on the election ■

On desk: ON TONIGHT'S NEWS, THE OPPOSITION SPEAKS



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# 3. ELECTION CAMPAIGN COVERAGE

**A** journalist should help citizens understand what is at stake in the election. In carrying out that responsibility, he or she should report on all the competing parties and candidates, providing information on their past and present programmes, and on their campaign activities.

A journalist should also seek other sources of information, in order not to rely entirely on party sources. For their part, the parties, aware of media influence on voters, often use communications strategies designed to limit critical coverage and to promote wide dissemination of campaign messages. Parties have “press relations” or “public relations” offices that design these strategies and often use “media specialists” recruited from the ranks of journalists.

One of the greatest challenges for journalists covering a campaign is to get past the political communications strategies to find the news and information that is genuinely useful to voters. The parties’ and candidates’ announcements, press conferences and opinion surveys should be treated carefully and judiciously.

Superior campaign coverage cannot be improvised. The key to good election journalism is preparation. Research on candidates should take place well before a campaign begins so that relevant questions can be posed at the right time. The right questions are those that reflect citizens’ concerns. Coverage should be based on these concerns, which in turn grow out of problems that people face in their daily lives. Through journalists, candidates are forced to confront these issues and to propose practical solutions.

A journalist should be in the field every day. But some areas demand special precautions, concerning both the handling of information and personal safety. This is especially true when an election is taking place in a country that is politically fragile or at war.

## 3.1 DESIGNING A COVERAGE PLAN

News coverage of an election campaign should start before the official campaign gets under way. The reporter is the key to a news organization’s strategy because he or she is in the field, covering public events, meeting the candidates, getting a sense of public opinion and filing articles.

In order to work well, a journalist has to be able to rely on the people in charge of his or her news organization, who organize news production and staffing for the campaign period. Given the logistical impossibility of having one reporter cover several candidates, an organization with a large enough staff should deploy them to ensure wide coverage.

Design of a coverage plan is a team effort involving considerable material and human resources. The latter include still and video photographers, sound technicians, audio and video editors, graphic designers, news directors. A reporter should ensure that his teammates share his professional approach to his work.

### Programming and layout

- A radio or TV news director should design special programmes – candidate debates, roundtables of candidates and panels of experts, or interactive broadcasts that allow candidates to present their ideas and to answer questions from members of the public.
- In the print media, the editor should determine the placement and the number of pages given over to opinion pieces by candidates, readers, experts and journalists themselves who write editorials and columns.

### News staff organization

- Meetings of editors are essential during election season. Discussion and decisions among journalists of differing views allow for coverage that reflects a balanced and complete view of a campaign.

- A special editorial conference held before campaigning begins is a good way to set the stage for coverage. The objective is to ensure that staffers' roles complement each other, and that the entire news team works well together. One key question: Who will be assigned to what? A journalist may be assigned to cover a region or a specific theme. Editors may also assign a journalist to cover one party or candidate. But under that system, journalists will also be assigned to each of the other parties or candidates, in order to ensure balance and impartiality.
- News organizations do not all enjoy the same resources. When staffs are small, every member must multitask. But daily discussions between news staffers remain essential.

### A journalist's preparation

- Gather as much information as possible about each political contender: party structure and operations, financing sources, regional strengths and weaknesses, political importance on the national and/or local level, past and present alliances, major campaign themes, performance in past elections.
- Identify and establish relationships with each party's spokesman or with an important official of each campaign. A journalist will want to be able to reach them quickly – for example, to know the date, time and place of a public event. Their assistance will also be needed to set up an interview with a candidate, or to get their immediate responses to campaign developments.
- Make a list of the major campaign issues and the most important problems that citizens want the candidates and parties to deal with.
- Draw up a roster of experts to consult for commentary on the campaign. A journalist for a national news organization should establish a network of sources at the local level.
- Make sure that standard press credentials are valid, and determine what special credentials will be required for campaign coverage.
- Find out from press-regulatory authorities what rules will apply to news organizations during the election period.

## 3.2 HANDLING CAMPAIGN RHETORIC

Parties and candidates know that voters tend to believe what they see and hear in the media. Hence politicians and their staffs do their best to influence journalists to provide the most favourable coverage.

The press release is their most widely used tool. Sent directly to news desks or handed out during press conferences, it is written in a style that is most accessible to journalists, with short, punchy sentences that sum up the basic message and can be used in their entirety. Press releases are designed to limit journalistic inquiry, thereby reducing the chance of critical coverage that contradicts the message.

With television now the major mass medium, candidates are increasingly likely to resort to political marketing methods to try to seduce the electorate. They adapt their body language and their appearance to this goal. And they design events to play on voters' emotions, instead of presenting the details of their programmes.

The following measures may help journalists avoid some common traps:

- Do not settle for simply relaying information from a candidate or a party, but try to explain what they are doing.
- Do not simply transcribe press releases and other announcements, even in paraphrase. Instead, compare what they say with what these candidates have accomplished in their previous posts, or with the positions they have taken in previous campaigns. Bring in experts to assess their proposals in light of the needs of the country or community and document possible contradictions and conflicts of interest.
- Put in quotes what is said in press releases or in press conferences and/or attribute them properly.
- Be assertive in press conferences. Do not simply listen. Demand explanations, specifics, examples, numbers and justifications.
- Do not rely on a party's numbers in reporting the attendance at a rally. Compare the party's statistics with estimates of other sources – journalists, residents of the area, members of police forces or anyone else present.

- Learn to recognize events designed by candidates in order to report them in context. Pay attention to the responses of people who are present for a candidate's visit to a school, a hospital or a business. Did his speech prompt any reactions? Were all of these positive? Did those who were visited ask any questions? Were these spontaneous? Remaining after the candidate leaves is a good way to learn more.
- Verify that a candidate's official message corresponds to his or her convictions. If a candidate visits a school to say that he always considered education to be a priority, find out if he has previously initiated projects in this field.
- Clearly distinguish between official activities of government members and their activities as candidate or party member.

### 3.3 CITIZEN-ORIENTED JOURNALISM

Parties and candidates at election time always try to ensure that coverage reflects their official agenda – emphasizing the major points of their campaign and passing over other issues.

This strategy is designed to enable a campaign to avoid dealing with the most national important issues. A journalist in these circumstances should identify and cover these issues in order to force parties and candidates to explain and debate the solutions they propose. Experts from universities and civil society organizations can help a journalist identify the major questions in all fields that campaigning politicians should deal with – economy, governance, land-use planning, health, education, justice, human rights and foreign policy.

But a journalist must keep his main focus on citizens' lives in order to know, understand and communicate their concerns. Some news organizations carry out surveys to find out the issues that most concern the electorate. Others have resorted to panels of citizens, local government officials and activists from local organizations to better understand the expectations of individuals and communities. A simpler method still is to go into the field to speak with ordinary citizens.

A journalist can use various techniques to place the public's concerns front and centre in an election campaign.

- **Tell individual stories** to show the importance and scope of major campaign issues or to underline the effects of each candidate's proposed solutions. A journalist increases the possibility that politicians will pay attention to an issue that has not yet surfaced in the campaign by humanizing it, through a vivid, detailed account of the problems that it poses to an individual or a community.
- **Report on issues that citizens themselves have raised**, and which they face every day – e.g. selective electricity blackouts, access to drinking water, deteriorated road systems, fuel price increases, shortage of schoolteachers and the absence of hospitals in a region. A journalist's accounts can help ensure that parties and candidates confront these issues.
- **Pay attention to everything.** Whether formally on the job or not, a journalist should always ask people with whom he comes in contact what is going on in the streets, the bars, the cafés, the markets, the offices, parks, family gatherings – in all the spaces where citizens discuss problems of vital importance. A conversation overheard in a grocery store or in a line at the post office can help a journalist take the pulse of public opinion – and be the starting point of an article.
- **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.

### 3.4 POLITICIAN INTERVIEWS

Interviews with candidates or party leaders are key events in campaign coverage. They allow a journalist go into detail concerning political programmes, and to get a closer understanding of a politician's personality.

Interviewing a politician is a difficult art form that demands a keen sense of human relations, a strong analytical ability and solid preparation. A

journalist who has done his or her background research will be in a position to ask the relevant questions and to stay focused during the interview.

## Preparing for the interview

### Research the background

- Assemble all information possible about the persons to be interviewed. Research their past. Where do they come from? What have they said, written or undertaken in the past? What are their financing sources? How are they perceived in the community? What do their friends and political foes think of them?

### Prepare questions

- Draw up a list of questions that lays out the sequence in which they are to be asked, and the estimated time of each answer. During the interview, one can depart from a list to follow up a statement, but it is safer to have a framework of questions in hand.
- List questions in decreasing order of importance. If the interview turns out to be shorter than scheduled, the major issues will have been dealt with.
- Prepare short, simple, direct questions. If a question is too long, too complicated and too general, a skilled politician will easily take control of the interview and only answer part of the question – the part that is in his interest to answer.

### Types of questions to ask

- What specific measures does the candidate propose to resolve the country's problems? Which measures have the highest priority? How will they be financed? What are the differences between the candidate's party and its opponents? If the candidate wins, will political alliances be forged? If yes, with whom and why? If the interview subject is an elected official whose term is ending and/or a member of the majority party, question him about his record and/or the promises that his party has not kept.
- For a candidate in a local election, questions should take into account the specific problems of communities in the regions involved.
- In order to obtain precise responses concerning specific issues, in-

clude questions based on the concerns that citizens have expressed to reporters.

## Conducting the interview

### Use a recorder

- Ask permission to record the interview. If the subject expresses reservations, explain that recording will produce a complete and accurate record of his statements, so that quotes will be completely reliable. Recording will also allow the journalist to concentrate on the subject's responses and to think about them during the interview.
- If the interview is not recorded, a journalist will depend entirely on his memory and his notes. Hence he should rapidly write down the major elements of the responses. Abbreviations are recommended, as is reviewing notes as soon as the interview is over.

### Use the semi-structured method

- In this technique, which assumes the interviewer cannot know all the relevant questions in advance, alternate open-ended questions on big topics (which prompt detailed answers accompanied by explanations) with semi-open questions (which prompt brief and specific answers) and with closed questions (which can be answered only by a yes or a no).
- Ask questions that complement each other, or pose the same questions with different wording to get more information. Demand clarifications and examples.
- Pay close attention to the answers. A journalist should be ready to improvise a question based on a word or an idea from the interviewee

### Keep control of the interview

- A journalist is in charge of an interview. He or she should never lose control. A sharp politician knows how to begin to answer a question, then to pose another that he wants to answer. For instance: "Yes, of course... but there is a question that I believe is important to answer..." It is best to let him finish or to politely interrupt if he talks too much, and then ask the original question again until getting a real answer.
- Be persistent but remain courteous and polite regardless of the subject's demeanour. Take note of his physical bearing, which can affect

the course of the interview. What is the journalist's position in regard to the subject? Ideally, the journalist should be facing the subject.

## Using the interview

### Respect the sense of the interview

- The issue does not arise if the interview is published or broadcast in its entirety. But if only extracts are used, or if the responses are accompanied by commentary, or if parts of the interview are used in a news story, a journalist should make sure that published or broadcast responses reflect the subject's message. If uncertain, a journalist should not hesitate to contact the subject again to clarify or specify.
- If the interview will be part of an article, start working on it immediately after the conversation. At that point, a journalist should decide on the article's main points and write an outline or a draft. Notes from the interview can help in locating quotes on a recording (if one was made) or in confirming a quote.

### What to do when a face-to-face interview is impossible?

#### Telephone interview

If a meeting with the subject cannot be arranged, the telephone is another option. A phone conversation allows a fairly direct exchange. As in a personal encounter, a combination of note-taking and recording is effective, but the subject should be notified about recording, and the equipment should be tested.

#### Email interview

Digital technology offers another alternative. The subject is sent the entire list of questions, but these cannot be modified on the spot, as in a face-to-face session. The risk is that the result is less spontaneous and less personal. But it may prove more precise and pose fewer professional hazards.

## 3.5 OPINION POLLS

Two kinds of surveys are conducted during election periods. One focuses on issues, measuring citizen views of campaign themes. The other is the popularity poll, which measures voters' intentions. Parties and candidates may commission their own polls in order to gauge the impact of their campaigns, and thereby adjust their programs or their images in accord with voter sentiment.

Surveys are information sources that cannot be neglected. But they must be treated carefully. A journalist should examine them closely before deciding to use them. Surveys vary widely in quality. Some of them may be financed and designed specifically to manipulate public opinion and the media.

**Surveys' news value is limited** because they are based on a so-called "representative" sample. This method is problematic in some regions, such as rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa, where language and illiteracy may pose obstacles to pollsters.

**Surveys can influence, even distort** the democratic process. Persistent questions surround the possible effects of polls on voter behaviour, including a possible tendency to choose the candidate who is shown to be running ahead in a poll, as well as the possibility that some voters will rebel by voting for a candidate shown as losing.

**A survey can be used for illegitimate purposes** that harm the democratic process. The risk of this is especially high in developing democracies where survey firms' practices are rarely subject to any legal oversight. Unscrupulous polling firms may use methodology with built-in biases – e.g. a sample limited to certain regions, questions designed to produce particular answers – in order to produce surveys with the results that their clients demand.

#### Examples:

- A ruling political party commissions a survey designed to show that the population is satisfied with the government's record.

- A presidential candidate commissions a survey structured in such a way as to damage the images of his adversaries.
- A business group commissions an issue survey as part of a plan to impose an economic programme on parties and candidates.
- An opposition party alleging electoral fraud commissions a survey to show that it won the election.

**A journalist should therefore:**

- Only cite surveys produced by professionals who follow rigorous and transparent methods.
- Treat surveys with extreme caution.
- Never base an article entirely on a survey.

**60** **Questions to raise concerning a poll**

- Does the survey have genuine news value?
- Are the survey's results different from those of other surveys? Who paid for the survey and who conducted it?
- How was the poll sample designed? Whom does it include?
- When was the survey conducted, and what was the methodology?
- What questions were asked? Are the results based on all responses or only some of them?

**Information to include in any article that includes survey results**

- The name of the political party, organization or person who commissioned the survey.
- The name of the polling organization.
- The number of people questioned and the survey's margin of error.
- The date or dates when the survey was conducted.

**3.6 ELECTION COVERAGE IN CONFLICT ZONES**

Some elections take place in countries in crisis conditions. Conflicts between government forces and rebel movements generally fit one of three categories:

- The opposition movement wants to overthrow the government and calls on the entire population to boycott the election so that the government is not legitimized by the vote.
- The opposition movement demands the independence or autonomy of part of the country and demands that its inhabitants boycott the election in order to bolster the cause.
- Government and opposition forces have agreed on a cease-fire, but have made a definitive peace agreement conditional on a free and fair election throughout the country or in the region on which the conflict centres.

Coverage of an election taking place under these conditions is a complex undertaking that poses many dangers to journalists. It demands especially strict observance of professional ethics – precision, impartiality, responsibility. And a number of safety rules apply to field reporting.

**Prudence, neutrality and balance**

- Be extremely careful concerning information and sources, given the high risk of manipulation; disinformation is an important weapon of war.
- Observe strict neutrality. This allows a journalist to do his or her job as safely as possible.
- Be sure to pay close attention to balance. A journalist reporting from a region where the opposition has called on inhabitants not to vote can base his work on four types of sources: a person who has cast a ballot out of conviction; a person who stayed away from voting for fear of reprisals by the authorities; a person who has not voted in order to support the opposition cause; a person who stayed home for fear of violence at polling stations.

## Safety rules

- Be sure to always carry the necessary documents – identification, press card, official accreditation, travel authorization and any other required papers.
- Never carry a weapon, nor any objects or clothing that might lead to misidentification – military garb, khaki jacket, leather boots, binoculars and the like.
- Never travel alone, but with colleagues or NGO members. Do not move about in the entourage of candidates or political leaders.
- Plan itineraries carefully to avoid combat zones. Regularly transmit information on location to home office, a friend or a family member.
- Avoid night-time travel, and be aware of curfew hours.
- When covering a political gathering or a big rally, check out the site and identify where to take cover in case of violence.
- If trouble breaks out, do not run, as that raises the risk of being targeted. Do not cross directly from one side of a confrontation to another.

## 3.7 ELECTION COVERAGE IN VOLATILE SITUATIONS

Media can play an important role in consolidating peace and democracy. Alternatively, they can help cause a conflict to break out by spreading rumours, propaganda, distrust and hatred between people and communities.

Another danger is that news organizations with little professional training may resort to loaded terminology without realizing the effect it can have. An election campaign is a perfect setting for overheated language that can spring from political debates and degenerate into violent verbal contests.

The risk of this happening is all the greater when an election takes place in a country transitioning from conflict, or one in which the political climate is a state of tension or latent conflict. An election can deepen divisions. Or the grievances that led to war can play out in a political conflict.

## Stay aware of the political context

A journalist's role in strengthening democracy and peace is even more important in sensitive circumstances. A journalist must sharpen his powers of observation and analysis in order to understand the complexity of the socio-political environment and the issues at stake in an election.

A journalist should do everything possible to avoid worsening the crisis, and should instead try to lessen it. This approach centres on strict observance of the rules of accuracy, verification, impartiality, neutrality and honesty in gathering and reporting news. Considerable preparation and deep knowledge of the potential sources of tension that could break out at election time are also essential.

### Essential questions:

- Who were the figures in the conflict or crisis, what were their motivations, and what were the underlying issues? What were the causes or factors of resolution, and who were the people behind it? If an accord has been signed, a journalist should know its general structure and major points.
- When ethnic or communal divisions play a significant role in a crisis or conflict, a journalist should have a deep understanding of each community's sociological realities. A journalist should also understand the ways in which each community has been affected by the events.

This research is essential because it makes a journalist aware of the actions and discourse that may signal a return of tensions, and thereby enables him to report on looming danger. He can then get leading figures or civil society organizations to remind parties and candidates of their commitments and of the accords they may have signed.

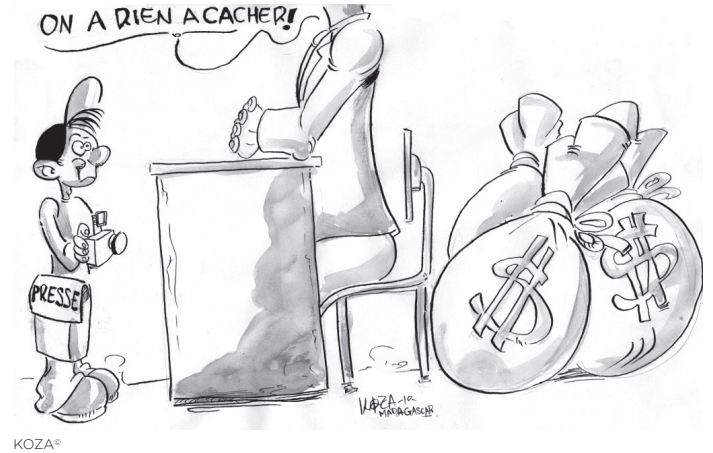
### Advice

- Focus coverage on the major challenges facing the entire society, in order to de-emphasize the issues driving crisis or conflict. Possibilities include access to drinking water, the state of the public health system or the state of the educational system. The objective is to help bring

the society together by showing citizens that they all face the same problems, unrelated to their ethnic, community or religious affiliations.

- Give ordinary citizens a chance to speak for themselves. This approach could take the form of debates or phone-in programmes that encourage members of the public to express their views. But take great care not to let these sessions degenerate into forums for aggressive, incendiary speech.
- Be extremely careful with the terms used in news reports. Make a point of using factual, balanced and neutral language ■

Headless figure: «WE HAVE NOTHING TO HIDE!»  
On figure at left: MEDIA



## Summary: Rules for journalists covering elections

**A**s protection from the multiple pressures arising during an election, a journalist should adhere to the basic ethical principles of the profession. Information must be accurate, verified, balanced, neutral, and respectful of human dignity. A journalist should always remember that he serves the interests of ordinary citizens.

In keeping with these principles, journalists must:

- **Be aware of the right and duty to speak with all parties and candidates**, including those most hostile to the government. All campaign issues important to the people and to the country's future are appropriate topics of reporting. There are few legitimate grounds for restricting freedom of expression and they should not in any way prevent presentation of a diverse range of ideas and opinions.
- **Present accurate and verified information** to ensure that their work is considered reliable. News should be presented in a spirit of modesty, factual rigour and sceptical inquiry, not forced conclusions.
- **Cover the views of all political competitors in reporting on programmes and debates**, without allowing personal opinion to tilt coverage. News reports should never try to tell voters who to vote for.
- **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. Absolute prohibitions should be observed on plagiarism and buying information, and on selling its presentation.
- **Always be conscious of the effects – positive and negative – that information can have.** In that spirit, news should be reported in neutral, un-sensational language. Topics with the potential to heighten tensions should be handled especially carefully.

## Specifics of the electoral process

In countries going through a period of democratic consolidation, transition or reconstruction, 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.

Moreover, journalists should:

- **Make sure to report on legal requirements**, giving special attention to eligibility standards for candidates and apportionment of electoral districts.
- **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.
- **Investigate the reliability** of independent electoral commissions and of all national agencies that play a part in the electoral process.
- **Verify that the rights and duties** listed in campaign codes of conduct are being respected by parties and candidates.
- **Ensure that all parties and candidates** are given equal voice in the media, especially publicly-owned news organizations.
- **Visit many polling stations** on election day to ensure that voting and vote-counting are conducted honestly.
- **Avoid publishing or broadcasting election results** that have not been officially announced by the electoral commission.
- **Explain precisely the reasons why results have been challenged** and the procedure to be followed when appeals are filed.

- **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.
- **Use political parties and civil society organizations as sources** in investigating fraud or irregularities, but treat these sources with care given the risk of being manipulated.

## Campaign coverage

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.

- **Journalistic work should begin before the campaign officially starts**, with the gathering of all possible information on parties and candidates. Campaign officials should be contacted, and the major issues and citizen concerns identified.
- **Drawing on experts, academics, and civil society leaders can help a journalist** identify the major issues on which the campaign should focus.
- **A journalist should not be content merely to recycle information from a party or candidate**, but should attempt to explain it and put it in perspective. Distinguishing between the official duties of a member of government and his or her activities as political actor is also essential.
- **A campaign interview with a politician is a difficult art** that demands solid preparation of relevant questions.
- **Survey results cannot be neglected** but must be handled with care, given their varying quality, as well as the issue of who paid for them.

A journalist plays a major part in the expansion and strengthening of democracy and peace, and his or her role is even more important in times of political tension. 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 ■

This handbook has been prepared with the cooperation of



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