



Pakistan Coalition for Ethical Journalism

Election Coverage: A Checklist for Ethical and Fair Reporting

(NOTE: These are suggestions for individual media organisations concerning editorial preparation for elections in line with Clause 9 of the Code for Election Coverage. It is not for circulation other than to media organisations and is intended to assist them in drawing up their own checklist.)

Introduction

The challenge of objectivity, impartiality and balance in media is faced daily by Pakistan journalists, but there is no test of professionalism greater than that posed by a political election. During an election the impulse to manipulate media and to control information is strongest among ruling parties and political leaders running for office.

The media in Pakistan recognise that their first duty is to provide citizens with access to all the facts, opinions and ideas being canvassed in the campaign. The principles of Pakistan media in coverage of an election are set out as follows:

- Our role is primarily to be the link between voters, the community and the political leadership.
- We are not the voice-box for politics alone; we also provide access to media to ordinary people so that citizen's voices can be heard.
- We shall review and underscore our professional guidelines and rules to ensure ethical practice in the reporting of all aspects of the election.
- We will remember that elections can bring out the worst in politicians (and journalists) – extreme opinions, extravagant promises and intemperate speech.
- Reporters and editors shall be wary of violent rhetoric and offensive opinion, particularly about minorities and vulnerable groups.
- Keeping the peace is the job of the police, but journalists should not do anything that may incite intolerance or hatred.

The following guidelines provide some basic advice for journalists and media in their election coverage:

Remain independent and Keep Your Distance

Pakistan journalists are citizens too and are entitled to their own political opinions, but they must be non-partisan in their journalism, especially when reporting elections.

Media opinions on politics will be kept to properly identified editorial columns and programmes.

In the news and current affairs reporting we must be fair to all parties and candidates.

Practicing journalists should not take part in any election activity, standing for election, speaking at party rallies or making financial donations.

Journalists and media representatives never take gifts, cash or in kind. There will be a political price to pay. If inducements are offered, check with the editor.

Journalists, broadcasters and publishers have a responsibility towards the society as a whole. Journalism was originally intended to be, and must continue to be, a useful instrument in the general interest rather than mouthpieces of individual, particular interests.

This explains why it is vital that politicians keep their hands out of the affairs of journalists. But it also means that journalists cannot be prevented by their advertisers or even their proprietors from acting professionally. Media should establish internal mechanisms to avoid undue pressure on journalists and to reinforce professionalism and independence.

Give Voters a Voice and Confront All forms of Bias

The most important people in an election are not the politicians – the party leaders or candidates. It is the Pakistani people and particularly those who vote. So give the voters a voice.

Media will provide information on the election process. They will examine the promises of people canvassing for votes and pose relevant questions that focus on the needs of citizens and the community.

We will show to voters that we are on their side and we will confront all forms of undue editorial bias in election coverage.

Allegations of bias in the news media are not unusual, particularly at election time. Politicians and public interest groups may regard the omission of certain news items or issues from newspapers and radio and television news bulletins as deliberate bias.

More often than not, journalists make these choices on the basis of sound professional judgment. But mistakes are made. When deadlines are tight and pressures are greatest, the weighing of these factors may be less thorough.

In general, journalists strive for fairness and for decisions made solely on the basis of news value. That is something which journalists always try to respect, and that is sometimes difficult for many outside journalism to understand.

Of course there is political pressure. Often it comes from the traditional supporters of particular media. This base may be identified by social status, language or other cultural dimension. Liberal newspapers tend to be left of centre in their editorial columns; conservative newspapers will favour right of centre politics.

Partisan journalism can be good journalism. Campaigning journalism in favour of human rights issues has often nurtured the best tradition in the profession, but the political opinions of the editorial columns should not interfere with the process of news gathering, news selection and placement.

Allegations of deliberate, political bias are easy to make and often difficult to refute. The gathering, editing and publishing of news involves decisions by people who inevitably bring their own background, values and prejudices to bear on deciding what to select, emphasize and colour as news.

But even if there is personal bias, there must be balance in the representation of a range of views. Lack of balance can lead to unfair representation of politics as well as unacceptable stereotypes that are unfair to women, homosexuals, and socially marginalized groups and minorities.

Media can express biased opinion. The editorial column, which serves as the institutional voice of a newspaper on a wide range of issues, must be biased because it expresses an opinion, even though such opinion must always be based on confirmed facts. Columnists and television anchors also have the right to express their opinions.

But none of this should lead to a lack of fairness in news reporting where balanced coverage of events is expected. Reporters, editors and proprietors must avoid actions which sacrifice even-handed journalism for partisan self-interest.

The suppression of essential or important facts and the deliberate distortion of other facts through wrong or improper emphasis must be forbidden.

News readers should not give preferential news coverage to one party or another and using deceptive "camera angles" to disguise or enhance the size of campaign rallies is not acceptable and using technology to enhance or diminish images of a candidate.

It is the media's job to act fairly. Remember that many politicians are skilled at manipulating people, including media. In the 2012 presidential elections in the United States billions of dollars are being spent on television time often to avoid politicians having to talk to free media.

Journalists can confront this approach by ensuring that they provide a link between election news and the reader, listener or viewer. News coverage should be a bridge connecting candidates and the voters.

In the age of social networks and open journalism the desire of the people to become more involved in the political process is here to stay.

Journalism should not focus on the glitz and the glamour of personality or character politics and the inevitable "horse race" model of reporting. We need to dig deep into the substantive issues that bring news values into line with concerns of the voters.

Getting Organised

Journalists covering elections need to know what they are talking about. We shall train our staff in election reporting and the importance of political pluralism.

Reporters and editors will ensure that they are fully briefed on all aspects of the election from the point of view of the voter as well as the political candidates.

In particular this includes

- understanding the constitutional and legal background to the holding of elections as well as the process of the election itself,
- knowing details about the parties, candidates and political manifestos,
- understanding the issues that are important for voters,
- using credible sources who provide insight to make sense of it all.

There should also be full understanding of **safety and security issues**. Journalists and media staff should not take unnecessary risks. Campaign events can be robust, even dangerous, journalists should at all times be aware of safety concerns.

Media should ensure that all journalists and media staff, including those employed at local and district level, are properly paid with recognised employment contracts

Each media organisation agrees to follow the minimum standards set out below for the editorial organisation of election coverage:

1: Details: To obtain from the electoral commission regarding all the details of the coming poll: registration date, start and closing day of the campaign period, Election Day specifics (how the polling will be organized, timetable for election returns, etc.).

2: Rules: To study the election rules: voting system, electoral laws, poll watching, laws governing international observation delegations, use of public opinion surveys, political advertising regulations, access to state media, electoral expenses limitations, etc.).

3: Guidelines: To work according to the common guidelines and code of conduct agreed by Pakistan media.

4: Audience awareness: To explain to readers and viewers your reporting rules, how you are going to cover the campaign and why and ensure that they are able to register concerns and complaints as appropriate.

6: Roles and responsibilities To establish an editorial team for the elections. Election coverage is the political desk's golden hour but should not be its exclusive preserve. All departments can be asked to perform duties according to their skills.

Specialised writers will analyze issues on their beat (economics, health, foreign affairs, economics, labour, education), others will compare competing political programmes, and some will scrutinise speeches and position papers, to track inconsistencies and expose propaganda.

7: Review procedure: To appoint an editorial election panel to review delicate questions that may arise as the campaign develops. It should include the editor-in-chief, the relevant department head, and a few distinguished commentators or reporters.

8: Backup systems To plan for emergencies: what do you do if something breaks down on your side (your computer crashes, when one of your reporters is arrested or wounded, etc.) and on the side of the government (failure in the collation of results, charges of irregularities, etc.)

9. Clarity of content and contact with audience: To promote civic education and carefully and repeatedly explain the principles and techniques of voting and what the election will lead to (a new parliament, separation of powers, transparency, etc.) and to introduce an open line to readers so they might ask questions on specific points of the campaign and air their views.

10: Plans for polls: To ensure that public opinion polls are not elections and do not become the dominant feature of election reporting. Unprofessional polls are bad news, for voters and for media. Some points:

- Never commission surveys that do not stick to the highest standards and never print them without fully explaining the conditions and the limits of the survey.
- Expose any fraud in a political party or newspaper survey. Never forget that polls will never replace old-style political reporting.
- Avoid using unattributed online information. The social networks are useful, but they are a rumour-mongering paradise.

11: Fact files and Background Reporting: To begin the editorial preparation well ahead of Election Day: prepare profiles of major candidates, close-ups on most electoral districts (economic base, population profile, major problems, party dominance).

12: Fair Access for Politicians: To allocate time and space for political comment by parties and politicians on a fair and rotating basis. Stop the process at least a week before election day so as not to give undue advantage to one candidate or to the propaganda of one party.

13: Beware of Media manipulation: To avoid stunts and cooked-up events from media-savvy parties and politicians that are designed just to grab headlines. And to avoid publishing political parties' press releases without checking them. These shall as a source for a more balanced story.

14: Attribution: To be credible and always attribute information and clearly identify and attribute any information coming from sources other than obtained from independent reporting.

15: Review process: To review how our team cover the campaign and to compare our performance with other media.

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