

Commonwealth Election Broadcasting Guidelines

As published by the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association for the Commonwealth Secretariat

The lead from Heads of Government

In a Declaration agreed in Singapore in 1971 and reaffirmed in the Harare Declaration 20 years later, the Commonwealth Heads of Government gave full and continuing commitment to a series of Commonwealth Principles. This included the following:

"We believe in the liberty of the individual under the law, in equal rights for all citizens regardless of gender, race, colour, creed or political belief, and in **the individual's inalienable right to participate by means of free and democratic political processes in framing the society in which he or she lives...**"

"Free and democratic political processes" must include elections whose credibility cannot be doubted by any voter, candidate or observer. The delivery of such credibility is very much in the hands of the media.

And so...

The Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association held a workshop in Toronto in May 2001 for senior broadcasters from a score of countries drawn from State, National and Commercial companies and corporations. From the lively discussions, these guidelines have been developed. They are offered as a template to be set alongside each broadcasting organisation's circumstances. Not rules but hopefully a useful checklist.

It was agreed at the workshop that all broadcast outlets, large or small, rich or poor have a public service duty to contribute to free and fair elections in any way they can. Radio and TV create and foster the democratic environment by telling the truth, by investigating the hidden, by explaining the background, by presenting the facts so that a well-informed electorate can make reasoned choices.

Preparing for an election - Essential steps

- **Establish a specialist Elections Unit**
a year before the elections are due. This group may meet weekly, to begin with, but the frequency will increase as the campaign period approaches. This unit may be a one-person unit on a very small station but, whatever the size, it will ensure that appropriate planning takes place. These should be the best planners, programme makers and journalists at your disposal.
- **Train your election team**
Ensure that an experienced senior journalist leads your team. As the elections approach, the team will inevitably expand. See that all new recruits to the team are of the highest calibre and cascade the training down to every level.
- **Draw up the station's own internal guidelines.**
How are we going to behave? How are we going to ensure balance? How are we going to monitor that balance? How are we going to resist pressure to act undemocratically? How are we going to respond to complaints?
- **Get the Guidelines acknowledged and accepted**
by all concerned as the basis for your election broadcasting. This includes the Ministry of Information, the major political parties and the body responsible for running the elections. If there are disagreements, it is better to have them when things are quiet than in the heat of the election.
- **Publish the Guidelines.**
This can be as a pamphlet, in newspapers or magazines, on a web site and of course on air. The wider the publicity given to your intentions, the easier it will be to convince the nation of the honourable role you are playing in the democratic process.
- **Establish an overall election programme plan.**
What programmes will be produced? What formats will be used? What rules will apply to programmes involving rival candidates? How will the programmes help to promote democracy? How will the issues be explained? Communicate this plan to the electoral body, to the politicians and to the audience.

Wherever possible get a consensus. But remember we exist to serve our listeners and viewers. What are their needs at this time? Responsibility for voter education rests substantially with broadcasters. For many in the audience this will be their first time to exercise the right to vote.

The media must get across to the public an understanding that their votes matter, that politics matter, that politics are about their lives, their health, their education, their culture, their security, their future. If yours is a commercial station, don't walk away at this point. You have a major role to play too. Your presenters are probably role models in your society. Your audience may well be made up of young people who will have to carry the torch of democracy into the next generation. So if you and your jocks publicly disdain or deliberately ignore politics you and they are doing democracy a grave disservice. Too many commercial managers shy away from the words "public service broadcasting" imagining their schedules full of turgid political discussions and documentaries. But creating a democratic environment is not necessarily a heavy intellectual exercise; it can be done by getting the liveliest studio guests, by conducting dynamic phone-in programmes, by slipping "pro-democracy" comments into the presentation flow.

Remind your broadcasters to focus on the audience. You are not addressing the News Editor, or the Director-General, or the Minister. Think always: what does that ordinary listener or viewer want and need to know?

- **Train the politicians**

Many will plead that politicians are boring and that may be true in many cases. But it won't do as an excuse for boring your audience. You are trained communicators. Politicians may not be. In every country, many of the leading politicians of all parties are poor broadcasters. In some countries there is a whole industry "grooming" candidates for TV and Radio. Where you can, pick the politicians who are already the best communicators. If there is no performance grooming industry in your country, offer training for the others. This is frowned upon by many journalists as teaching politicians how to appear better on radio and TV than they really are. In highly developed broadcasting environments this may be so. In newer democracies, where politicians may not

fully understand how best to use the opportunity to get their message across, a few tips on presentation and the media's role in a democracy can make a world of difference - especially for the poor listener or viewer.

- **Establish a comprehensive system for monitoring your election output.**

You must be able to judge at every point in the campaign the balance of the programmes up to that point and relate that balance to the output that will follow. It will often be necessary to adjust the output to maintain fairness. Editors need to assess each bulletin and where normal journalistic judgement creates an unavoidable temporary imbalance, they must rectify it as soon as possible over succeeding output. Editors in many stations have to rely on possibly faulty and/or incomplete memory to judge whether, over the campaign period, all parties have been and are being treated fairly. Some meticulous system must be set up so that such judgements can be made rapidly and backed by evidence. A large wall-chart with basic details of every election story broadcast entered after each bulletin would be a good start.

Major issues needing specific guidelines

There are no easy answers to any of these issues but each needs addressing in the interests of democracy.

Allocation of Air time

Direct / Free Access for Party Election Broadcasts and/or Party advertising.

In most countries, if not all, the parties will want direct access to the airwaves to put across their manifestos, unhindered by awkward questions from journalists. What do you offer them in the way of number, duration and timing of broadcasts? How do you divide up the available time between the parties? There needs to be something close to parity for the main parties and an agreed smaller number of broadcasts for minor parties. Do the parties pay for them? Can the richest party (usually the ruling party) have as many as it wants? This would seem seriously undemocratic. It would be appropriate for at least the minimum number of broadcasts for each party to be publicly funded.

The Electoral Commission of India introduced a new scheme in 1998 whereby "a base time of 45 minutes is given (free of cost) to each recognised National or State Party uniformly and additional time is allocated to parties decided on the basis of the poll performance of the parties in the last Lok Sabha and State Assembly Elections."

Does the station retain any editorial control over these programmes? Whether or not, the station must have a system for monitoring them. It would be better to pre-record them. Are you obliged to provide production facilities? If not, you will have to insist on minimum technical standards. What if a programme is too long or contains unacceptable abuse of political opponents? Who edits it?

Ghana's GBC claims the right to edit any programme (in consultation with the political party concerned) "if it is objectionable for any of the following reasons: against public order or morality, offends national unity, infringes any law of the land, insensitive to the reputation, rights and freedoms of others".

In Canada it is put another way. Question: Can a broadcaster "censor" a political ad? Answer:

unless the political ad contravenes the regulations or the licence conditions, a broadcaster is not entitled to censor the ad. (Extract from the Broadcasting Arbitrator's Guidelines)

These may seem over-detailed considerations but getting the ground rules clear in advance is the key to making them stick when crises inevitably arrive.

Balance in news and current affairs output. This is hard to define precisely as it is a matter of fine judgement. Editors need to assess each bulletin and where normal journalistic judgement creates an unavoidable temporary imbalance, they must rectify it as soon as possible over succeeding coverage.

The latest BBC guidance on election coverage leads with a section on "Achieving Balance":

"Daily News magazine programmes... must achieve an appropriate and fair balance in coverage of the main parties in the course of each week of the campaign...

...Each strand (e.g. a drive time show on radio) is responsible for reaching its own targets within the week and cannot rely on other outlets at different times of day (e.g. the breakfast show) to do so for it.

Single programmes should avoid individual editions getting badly out of kilter. There may be days when inevitably one party dominates the news agenda e.g. when the main party manifestos are launched, but in that case care must be taken to ensure that coverage of similar prominence and duration is given to the other manifesto launches on the relevant days.

Every edition of the multi-item programmes which cover the campaign...should refer in at least one item to each of the main parties...

...Weekly programmes, or running series within daily sequence programmes, which focus on one party or another should trail both forwards and backwards so that it is clear to the audience that balance is built in over time.

(Extracts from the latest "Guidance to all BBC Programme Makers during the General Election Campaign")

Bribery and corruption

How can we prevent candidates from expecting, demanding even, favourable coverage by reporters in return for transport, food and accommodation? How can we stop the blatant bribing of journalists with cash or other favours? The station must make it clear to the journalists that to accept any sort of bribe is a serious breach of duty likely to result in dismissal. The politicians must be told that any instance will be reported immediately to the electoral body as an attempt to distort the election process.

Comment (as opposed to news)

How do we ensure that reporters and editors avoid expressing their own opinions? How do we separate and identify the legitimate contributions of political commentators from what is news? In some countries too many journalists are identified with one or other political party. This completely destroys their credibility and that of their station. A station's house rule, making it crystal clear that the newsroom bulletin writers and reporters are forbidden to express their own political views, must be made public and restated at regular intervals.

Complaints

To whom?

Should complaints about unfair treatment be addressed? Probably to the Editor in Chief in the first instance. If not satisfied with the outcome, the complainant should alert the Electoral Commission or other electoral authority.

Guarantee of prompt response.

Stations should guarantee to investigate any complaint immediately and respond within a given (very short) time.

Right of reply.

Where a right of reply, a retraction or the correction of a matter of significance is justified, such a response should be placed in a position of equal prominence to the original error.

Fair coverage

Does "fair" mean equal? Or is "equitable" a better word? What does "equitable" mean? In South Africa, **SABC's guidelines for election coverage** offer an answer:

"Equitable does not mean equal:

The SABC will treat all parties and all viewpoints

equitably. But this does not mean we will distort our news values and processes by giving the same weight to small one-person parties as we do to serious contenders for a place in national or provincial government. The electorate is entitled to more comprehensive coverage of serious contenders for a place in government.

Equitable treatment is achieved over time:

Equitable treatment is unlikely to be achieved in a single programme. This also means that not all parties have the right to appear on every programme.

Consistency:

We will be consistent in our treatment of contesting parties and conflicting views.

Seeking out information:

We will not only rely on parties to bring information to us, but will actively seek out information. Failure to do so would skew our coverage in favour of those parties with more resources."

(Extract from Guidelines for election reporting on SABC radio and TV services - Election '99)

Government news agencies

In many developing democracies it is the Ministry's news agency that gathers news from around the country and feeds it, often highly selectively and censored to the broadcasting newsrooms. The newsrooms are pressured to carry the material unedited, unchecked and unchallenged. Just because a story comes via a Government agency doesn't mean that it doesn't need checking. If the newsroom knows from other reliable sources that a Ministry of Information statement is untrue, that fact must be made clear in what is broadcast, e.g. "this statement from the Ministry is refuted by..." or "...contrasts with our own reporter's first hand observation..."

Manipulation of the Media

How do we ensure that candidates don't use other, non-political, broadcast programmes to increase their electoral advantage?

In a campaign period, how do we deal with the common problem of Presidential, Head of State or other ministerial engagements being turned into huge supplementary electioneering broadcast opportunities? This is a major problem in many countries, which grossly distorts the balance of election coverage on radio and

TV. All candidates, up to the highest level, must be told, well before the election, that the media will not aid the making of political capital out of day-to-day official events. Politicians who try this on will find the event reported but not any blatant electioneering statements.

In Canada, the principles underlying the **CBC's election coverage** are found in the CBC's *Journalistic Standards and Practices* (rev. 2001). Sub-section 5.4 warns of the danger of the manipulation of events for political advantage. Under "Election or Referendum Campaigns" it says:

"Particular care must be given to information programs during election or referendum campaigns. These series require close and meticulous attention to overall political balance. Quantitative checks are normally employed for guidance during election or referendum campaigns. Such quantitative checks must be supplemented by the exercise of qualitative judgments so that imbalance does not occur through the manipulation of events."

Extract from CBC's *Journalistic Standards and Practices* (rev. 2001).

Monitoring of Election Coverage

Full records.

Editors must maintain full records of all news bulletins and recordings of all other programmes related to the election, including Party Election Broadcasts.

Access to monitoring records.

Stations must be prepared to provide the Electoral supervisory body at any reasonable time with all such records, information and recordings as that body may require to fulfil its monitoring role.

Opinion Polls

Great care must be used when quoting opinion polls about the outcome of the election. This applies to all democracies. A party may try to swing floating voters by publishing so-called opinion polls that appear to put it in a strong position. Ask yourself: Who paid for the survey? When was it done? Where was it done? How was it done? If a poll appears to have been conducted using

dubious methodology, its outcome should receive no mention on air whatever.

Politicians who demand specific journalists.

Can we allow political parties to demand (as they frequently do) specific journalists to cover (or not to cover) their campaign meetings and rallies? There is only one answer: no. The editor must be free to allocate reporting tasks to whichever journalists he or she chooses. A Politician who seeks to get his or her rally covered by a specific journalist risks getting no coverage of that event at all.

Presidential Press Offices.

What can we do about the Presidential Press Office team? In many countries these politically selected and motivated "journalists" deliver sealed envelopes of "news copy" to newsrooms with the spoken or unspoken instruction not to drop or change a single word. As with material from the Ministry of Information, it is up to the news editor to judge its news value and accuracy. It must be made clear that reproducing such material unedited can only happen in the ruling party's Party Election Broadcasts and not in the station's normal news output.

Right of reply

See Complaints (above).

Running orders

Where a story is placed in a news bulletin will determine its perceived importance. Proper journalistic judgement must be used to prevent giving one party the lead position regardless of balance and the news value of the story.

Self-censorship

Is it censorship or self-censorship that compels editors to put the most un-newsworthy item at the head of almost every bulletin if the word President appears in the story? Even if it only about a garden party for the President's aunt's birthday? Surely Presidents must wince with embarrassment at this fawning lack of professional judgement. The station's management must support the editors and the shop-floor journalists all the while they are applying the highest journalistic standards.

Voter education

The Media share the responsibility. Publicly owned media have an obvious duty throughout the election

campaign and up to the close of poll, to provide education and information on the electoral process designed to ensure a maximum poll by a well-informed electorate. As communicators, broadcasters must get together with the electoral officers to devise the best way to use the media to provide this service. Privately owned stations that run any level of news operation must also play a part in this process.

It goes without saying but it is worth repeating that voter education programmes must not in any way further the interests of any party or candidate.

Vox pop is not a scientific poll and should be used with care. The electorate must not be led to believe that one of these street samples has any statistical validity. It merely reflects a range of views amongst that group people at that time but it is no real measure of overall voting intentions.

Who owns the media? Can a political party own a radio or TV station? This may not seem to come within the guidelines but it may need to be brought up with the Electoral Authority because it clearly skews the overall balance of direct access. Also, as we know, some politicians and political parties do hold undisclosed ownership or controlling interest in radio and TV stations.

Guyana's Media Code of Conduct (October 2000) states "media owners and practitioners who are candidates or hold office in political parties (must) refrain from using their programmes to promote their political objectives".

And finally...

These are not rules (you must make your own) but they are the reflection of principles that no broadcaster (station director or journalist) can dismiss without careful consideration. If they are ignored, the electorate is entitled to ask why. If broadcasters fail to deliver truly fair coverage of elections then the principles upon which the Commonwealth is founded are under severe threat.

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