



**NATIONAL
DEMOCRATIC
INSTITUTE**
FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Fifth Floor
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 328-3136
fax: (202) 939-3166
email: demos@ndi.org
<http://www.ndi.org>

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MONITORING MEDIA FAIRNESS IN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS: AN INTRODUCTION TO BASIC ISSUES¹

Democracy depends on all contesting points of view being fairly and equitably communicated so that the people may make informed choices. The ability of the opposition, in addition to governing forces, to avail itself of the news media is critical in this regard. There cannot be meaningful and vigorous debate of fundamental issues facing a country without a vehicle for widely expressing views. The news media provide that vehicle in many instances.

Material resources of the political parties and candidates, including those used to finance communications with the public, are crucial to effective participation in the electoral process. Access of political parties and candidates to the news media, through free and purchased messages, are usually critical campaign resources. While absolute equality between contending parties and candidates is rarely possible, the degree to which a government acts to ensure equitable and fair campaign resource distribution -- including access to and fair treatment by the news media -- is central to a government's ability to hold free and fair elections.

It is, therefore, proper for government agencies charged with responsibility for administering elections, or agencies charged with media oversight, to monitor the news media to ensure that they provide equitable access to and fair coverage of those contesting an election. Moreover, it is in the best interests of the political parties and candidates to monitor the media to ensure that they are able to avail themselves of this crucial resource. It is also advisable for nonpartisan citizens' organizations to monitor the news media to determine whether the public is provided ample opportunities to receive meaningful messages from the contending parties and candidates, which are necessary for the electorate to make informed decisions on how to vote.

International election observers may also establish media monitoring activities. This requires a continuous presence in the country well in advance of elections, at a minimum throughout the official election campaign period. Media activity prior to the beginning of the campaign may also play a significant role. It is therefore advisable for international observers to begin media monitoring, as

¹ This document was written by Patrick Merloe, Senior Associate for Election Processes at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, to assist the initiation of media monitoring efforts in transitional democracies. It draws significantly on GUIDELINES FOR ELECTION BROADCASTING IN TRANSITIONAL DEMOCRACIES, by S. Coliver and P. Merloe (ARTICLE 19; London: 1994).



well as all other pre-election monitoring, as far in advance of the election date as possible. In addition, it is advisable for international observers to cooperate with domestic monitoring efforts. In order to build the capacity of domestic actors interested in ensuring the integrity of elections, it is also advisable to provide training in media monitoring to such persons or organizations as part of international observer efforts.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR MEDIA MONITORING

There are four principle aspects to media monitoring. The first aspect concerns monitoring how the government acts to ensure the news media's right to gather and impart information and ideas. The second aspect concerns how the government and the news media act to provide access to political parties and candidates so that they may effectively communicate with the public during election campaign periods. The third aspect concerns how the government and the media act to ensure fair and objective coverage of political parties and candidates in news and information reporting. The fourth aspect concerns how the government and news media act to educate the electorate on how and why to vote.

Media monitoring should begin with an analysis of government actions, or its failures, to ensure the media's right to gather and impart information. This analysis should focus upon the media's ability to criticize activities or inaction of the government and the governing party, to investigate corruption and to operate independently of political pressures.² Media monitors can identify and document a number of factors that may inhibit the media from performing these functions. Among such factors are the following.

- **Direct government censorship and intervention, including:**
 - 1) prior restraints, usually pursuant to law, on publication of material concerning certain subjects (such as redrawing national or internal boundaries);
 - 2) banning media access for certain political parties and/or candidates;
 - 3) refusal of government-controlled media to run stories about or advertisements by certain political contestants; 4) confiscation of publications for political reasons;
 - 5) closure of media outlets for political reasons;
 - 6) prosecuting journalists and/or publishers for sedition or other charges (such as libel) for carrying out legitimate professional activities;
 - 7) use of martial law or states of siege to curtail media activity in order to gain electoral advantage; and
 - 8) using threats of any of these actions to gain electoral advantage.

² The analysis should also consider truly significant developments effecting press freedoms in the country's recent history. This is necessary where such developments are likely to be reflected in the media's approach to election campaign reporting.

- **Indirect forms of censorship, including:**
 - 1) government action or inaction that places journalists and/or publishers in fear for their safety or for the security of their premises or equipment; and
 - 2) manipulating (a) licensing of media outlets, (b) import licensing of equipment, newsprint and/or other supplies necessary to effectively run media outlets and/or (c) government-controlled resources (such as newsprint or electricity), in order to gain electoral advantage.

- **Intimidation and attacks on the news media aimed at preventing the media from fulfilling their legitimate role in the electoral process, including:**
 - 1) government attacks on journalists, such as security forces physically beating them or firing on them, their vehicles or premises; and
 - 2) arbitrary detention of journalists, editors and publishers in order to interfere with reporting on events pertinent to the election.

- **Failure of the government to provide adequate protection** for journalists, editors and publishers against intimidation and attacks by supporters of political parties or candidates and/or from political extremists, as well as failure investigate such acts and to prosecute vigorously those responsible for such acts.

- **Self-censorship by news media** done in attempts to avoid government censorship and intervention, indirect censorship or intimidation and attacks by nongovernmental forces aimed at preventing the media from fulfilling their legitimate role in the electoral process; self-censorship may also entail publishers or editors suppressing accurate information in order to favor a political contestant they support or to harm one they oppose.

In addition, media monitoring should evaluate the availability and function of complaint mechanisms accessible to the media for seeking redress against the foregoing abuses as well as complaint mechanisms available to redress media mistreatment of political parties and candidates. These mechanisms could include procedures before a government election commission, a government body charged with media oversight, the police, prosecutors and/or the courts. The availability of the right to reply and media self-regulatory mechanisms should also be considered.

MONITORING THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA

Media monitoring often concentrates on the impact of the electronic media (i.e., television and radio).

First, the number of radio and television stations to be monitored must be decided. National radio and TV channels are obvious monitoring choices. Local and regional stations may also be important. This is particularly true where the typography of a country makes it difficult to receive stations and channels transmitted from distant locations and/or in countries where there are important language differences between various regions. Also, the relative importance of monitoring electronic media is affected by the literacy rate and the distribution systems for the print media as well as the number of relevant broadcast languages used and the number of and access to radios and television sets.

Second, the number of monitors that will be needed depends on 1) the number of factors to be monitored, 2) the number of stations and channels included in the project, 3) the number of hours of relevant programming to be monitored, 4) whether a comprehensive review of all programming is to be undertaken, 5) whether relevant programming is aired at the same time on different outlets and 6) whether tapes are available for each relevant program. More than one person (perhaps as many as three) should evaluate each program to identify and eliminate monitor bias. A careful analysis of these elements is necessary to calculate the number of monitors that will be needed.

Third, the types of programming to be monitored may include: direct access programs that allow the political parties and candidates to communicate campaign messages directly to the population through free time slots and/or paid advertisements; news coverage; special information programs that cover topics of import to the elections, such as debates, candidate interviews and panel discussions; voter education messages developed by the government, political parties and/or nonpartisan citizens' organizations. General programming can be reviewed for subtle forms of manipulation, such as using candidates or party representatives, symbols, slogans and/or songs in entertainment programs.

Fourth, the number of factors evaluated will depend in part on the type of programs monitored, such as (a) direct assess, (b) news, (c) information and (d) voter education programs.

(a) Direct Access Programs

Monitoring direct access programs or messages for parties and candidates should include the following considerations.

- ✓ The types of access time provided, including: whether the time is live or taped; whether all political contestants must use the same formats (e.g., one person must deliver the message or a variety of sources can be employed, music and images may or may not be used, etc.); and whether all contestants are given same the opportunity to present high quality productions.

- ✓ Whether the amounts of access time are allocated equitably, including: whether equal time is given to all political contestants; or, in the case where a division is made between major political contestants and more numerous minor contestants, whether equal amounts of time is given to contestants in each category and whether the minimum amount of time given is sufficient to present meaningful messages to the public.

- ✓ Whether there are impartial criteria for qualifying political contestants for direct access time and for the allocation of that time, including provisions for new parties and independent candidates.

- ✓ Whether an impartial system is used to ensure that no party or candidate is favored by receiving choice access times, while others are consistently aired at late or other odd times.

- ✓ Whether financing of direct access messages is equitable, including: whether adequate time for meaningful messages is provided free of charge to the parties and candidates or at a nominal rate; whether additional commercial time is available and whether there are limitations to ensure that one party or candidate can not monopolize that time or otherwise take undue advantage of such time or benefit from political favoritism of media owners.

(b) News Coverage

A more difficult -- but critical -- area to monitoring the electronic media is news and information programming that is relevant to election campaigns. Among the factors to evaluate in this area are the following.

- ✓ Whether there is balance or imbalance in the quantity of coverage given to the contending political parties and/or candidates. To gauge this factor monitors will need to review news stories and information programs with a stopwatch and note the number of seconds devoted to each party and candidate.

- ✓ Whether there is balance or imbalance in the quality of coverage. To gauge this factor a number of elements must be evaluated, including:

- 1) whether certain parties or candidates are disproportionately presented in a positive light;
- 2) whether certain parties or candidates are disproportionately presented in a negative light;
- 3) whether certain parties or candidates appear disproportionately as the first political contestant covered;
- 4) whether the actual voice of the speaker is used in reports about certain parties or candidates, while the voice of the announcer is used on reports on other political contestants; and
- 5) whether film footage of certain contestants or their events is used in reports, while no footage is used in reports on others.

✓ Whether standards of accurate reporting are violated to a degree reaching manipulation of coverage. Examples of this include: consistent use of camera angles that make the crowds at certain parties' or candidates' rallies appear larger than reality, while using angles on other contestants' rallies that make them seem smaller than reality; broadcasting film footage that does not correspond with the events reported in order to favor certain parties or candidates; broadcasting unsubstantiated reports that favor one party or candidate or that damage another party or candidate in the eyes of the electorate.

✓ Whether reporting fails to distinguish between coverage of government officials conducting newsworthy government actions and such officials conducting election campaign activities.

✓ Whether reporting on opinion polls is given undue prominence, which could favor one party or candidate over others. Factors to consider in this regard include whether: the polls come from reputable sources; the source of the poll was revealed in the broadcast; the margin or error, the time the poll was conducted, the size of the sample, the location of the sample, the actual questions asked and other contextual material was reported; if gaps between political contestants were within the margin of error, was that reported; the results of other reputable polls on the same subject at about the same time were included in the report; and polling trends over time were included in the report.

(c) Information Programs

A third area to monitor in the electronic media is information programming relevant to the election. Such programs include individual and panel interviews, debates, forums, so-called "talk-back" programs with party representatives and/or candidates and roundtable discussions concerning topics of import to the election. Among the factors to consider in this area are the following.

✓ Whether there is interviewer or moderator bias toward certain parties or candidates.

✓ Whether parties and candidates receive equitable and sufficient time to present their ideas.

- ✓ Whether all participating parties or candidates were provided the same amount of time to prepare for the program.
- ✓ Whether camera angles, lighting and positioning of participants treated all participating parties and candidates equally.

(d) Voter Education Programming

The last type of programming to monitor in the electronic media is voter education programming. Factors to consider in this area include.

- ✓ What time of day such programs or announcements were aired.
- ✓ How frequently were they aired.
- ✓ Did the messages adequately inform voters about, when where and how to register to vote and/or where, when, how to vote.
- ✓ Did the messages address sufficiently why it is important to register and/or to vote.
- ✓ Did the messages use minority languages and/or were they especially aimed to reach any group that traditionally has low voter participation, such as women and newly eligible voters.
- ✓ Did the messages favor any party or candidate.

Fifth, once data is collected, it can be evaluated according to how a particular media outlet treats each party and/or candidate. It can also be evaluated to determine how each party and candidate is treated over a range of outlets.

Sixth, the number of parties and candidates to track in the monitoring project will depend on the number contesting the election. Resources may necessitate limiting the number of parties and/or candidates tracked to those that have a realistic chance of winning seats.

Seventh, the duration of the project must be determined. It must start sufficiently in advance of election day to evaluate radio's and television's likely effect on voter behavior. In some countries this question arises a considerable time before the election, while in others it only becomes an important issue several weeks before election day.

Eighth, a budget must be developed to cover the costs for 1) obtaining radios and televisions (although they usually can be made available by volunteers), 2) audio and video tapes and taping equipment (in some instances, radio and television stations will make tapes available for monitoring free of charge), 3) stopwatches; 4) developing and producing evaluation forms, 4) paying monitors

for their time and 5) developing and distributing reports concerning results of the monitoring project. Because large quantities of time may not be needed to monitor news, information, political advertisements and voter education programs, it may be possible to recruit volunteer monitors. Continuity of monitors is important for removing bias and producing comprehensive results; therefore, it may be necessary to pay monitors.

MONITORING THE PRINT MEDIA

Monitoring the print media is a resource-intensive endeavor. There often are a large number of newspapers and magazines published in a country, and it is usually not possible to monitor all of them. Typically, only newspapers with national circulations and papers with large circulations in major cities or regions can be monitored.

Several interrelated considerations must be evaluated before deciding whether and how to monitor the print media.

First, the number of newspapers to be monitored must be decided. Papers which influence large or particularly important segments of the population should be considered for monitoring. The actual number of papers to be monitored will ultimately depend on an evaluation of other considerations, discussed below.

Second, the number of monitors that will be needed should be calculated. This will in part depend upon the number of factors to be evaluated for each monitored publication. If seven factors are evaluated for each publication, for example, then the amount of time will include that needed 1) to review a publication to identify pertinent articles, 2) to separate those articles for record keeping (if that is to be done), 3) to evaluate each article according to the seven factors and to record the evaluation on monitoring forms, and 4) to tabulate and report on the results. This easily could amount to two or more hours per monitored publication. One monitor, therefore, could probably only monitor three to five publications in an eight-hour period.

In addition, it is important to identify and eliminate monitor bias. This means that more than one person should evaluate each monitored publication. While several persons might monitor each publication in an ideal circumstance, three persons per publication is likely to be the most possible. This means that if three persons evaluate each monitored publication, only three to five publications could be effectively monitored each day, while six to ten could be monitored by six persons.

Third, the number of factors to be monitored must be determined. The number of factors monitored will depend upon the number of monitors and the financial resources available to the project. Typically, most of the following factors are evaluated:

- 1) the number of column inches given to each political party and/or candidate;
- 2) the number of times a party's or candidate's name is mentioned;
- 3) the page number of the article;

- 4) the article's location on the page;
- 5) whether a photo appeared with the article;
- 6) who was depicted in the photo;
- 7) whether the article was about election campaign activity or something else (such as a governmental function or personal action); and
- 8) whether the tone of the article and/or photo was positive or negative.

If a political advertisement appears for a party and/or candidate, an evaluation should be made to determine whether it was given adequate space, whether its layout was treated equitably and its location was equitable compared to advertisements by other political contestants. Positive and negative weights can be assigned to such factors to arrive at an overall score for each article or advertisement.

Fourth, the data collected can be evaluated according to how a particular publication treats each party and/or candidate over specified time intervals. The data can also be evaluated to determine how each party and/or candidate is treated over a range of publications.

Fifth, the number of parties and/or candidates to track in the monitored publications will depend on the number contesting the election and the resources available to the monitoring project. When there is a large number of parties and/or candidates, it might be necessary to limit monitoring to those that are reasonably expected to be seated in the legislature and/or to win majoritarian elections. In proportional elections with party lists, it may be necessary to limit monitoring to candidates who are actually likely to take seats.

Sixth, the duration of the monitoring project must be determined. The project should start sufficiently in advance of election day to measure the effect of the print coverage on voter behavior. While voters may not pay considerable attention to the treatment of political parties and candidates far before election day, it is not sufficient to monitor the media simply for the few days before the election. In some countries, media manipulation may be a particularly important issue well in advance of the election.

Also, at least a week should be planned at the beginning of the project to test monitoring methodology in order to make necessary adjustments. Limiting the number of parties and/or candidates covered, the number of factors evaluated and/or the number of publications monitored may be necessary, given the amount of financial and human resources available for the project.

Seventh, a budget must be developed to cover the costs of 1) subscribing to the monitored publications, 2) developing and producing evaluation forms, 3) paying monitors for their time and 4) for developing and distributing reports concerning results of the monitoring project. It may be possible to obtain free subscriptions and to use volunteer monitors. Maintaining continuity of the monitors is very important, which may mean that they should be paid for the substantial amounts of time required.

MONITORING RESULTS

The results of media monitoring should be seen as part of an overall election monitoring effort. Results may be used to seek changes in government behavior towards the media and to seek changes in media behavior toward parties and/or candidates. A plan, therefore, should be developed for disseminating reports on media monitoring.

Monitoring results may be used, where necessary, as part of efforts to secure the parties', candidates' and citizens' rights to impart and receive information needed to make informed choices in a fair electoral process. This may include using the results in complaint procedures before the national election commission, the governmental body responsible for media oversight and/or before the courts. The results of media monitoring also can be provided to the international news media and to international election observers that are monitoring the electoral processes of the country.

International observers that monitor the media should plan to issue reports periodically, beginning well before election day. This may lead to increased confidence of the electorate where media behavior is deemed fair and balanced, or it may lead to modified and improved behavior if irregularities are found.