MONITORING AND MITIGATING / ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

THROUGH NONPARTISAN CITIZEN ELECTION OBSERVATION

03 HOLDING THE MEDIA ACCOUNTABLE

The language and rhetoric of media, including print, broadcast, radio, online publications, and social media like Twitter and Facebook, can serve as a significant forecast for and catalyst of politically-motivated violence. Some media outlets have been attributed to fueling polarizing views, inciting tensions and distorting facts in vulnerable environments. Often reports from citizen monitoring groups serve as a reliable alternative source of information to corrupt and/or highly polarized media that may aggravate rumors, report information in a biased manner, or fail to report incidents of violence and coercion. Citizen LTOs are in a critical position to monitor the media for hate speech and inflammatory or divisive rhetoric that serve as significant warning signs. In addition, monitoring organizations can use their widespread networks and nonpartisan reputation to harness public scrutiny of media behavior and alert authorities and the international community to irresponsible media conduct.

PLANNING AND BUDGETING

Tracking the tone and content of the media should be folded into the larger long-term effort of citizen election monitors. Media accountability monitoring should span the length of an organization's long-term observation process, including well before, during and after election day. While comprehensive media monitoring is an enormous undertaking, requiring a high level of capacity and resources, a more targeted media monitoring effort focused on early warning signs may not require substantial additional resources or staff.[11]

If resources allow, a specific core team of LTOs may be assigned to exclusively examine the media. Depending on the availability of national news sources, this is something that can be done largely at the headquarters level with a relatively low level of financial resources. However, all LTOs should be trained to alert the headquarters if they observe troubling media behavior in their deployment

[11] For a detailed methodology for monitoring traditional news media, see NDI's handbook entitled Media Monitoring to Promote Democratic Elections, R. Norris & P. Merloe, 2002.

areas. In addition to staff time, monitoring groups should be prepared to pay for newspapers and magazines, if relevant, as well as some recording equipment if they are monitoring television and/or the radio. If the electricity supply is unreliable, having a generator is critical to ensure that no news is lost.

DATA COLLECTION AND FACT-CHECKING

Data Sources

Different types of media are popular in different countries and contexts. In some areas, the vast majority of the public receive information from print media and radio. In other places broadcast television and the Internet may be a more common source of information. Social media is also rapidly becoming a popular source of information in many countries, particularly among young, educated and urbanized populations. Observer groups monitoring the media should carefully assess what the most relevant sources of media are in their respective countries. If observers are operating in a media-saturated environment, it may not be advisable or even possible to comprehensively observe all aspects of the media.

Groups should thus prioritize their monitoring effort by focusing on specific media sources, channels, sites and/or particular programs that have considerable influence on the public, as well as on specific groups and/or individuals that may be most likely to engage in hate speech or inflammatory and divisive rhetoric. Dangerous rhetoric is increasingly going "underground" into more informal, online arenas. Monitoring efforts should take into account that in some contexts, sources outside of traditional media, such as blogs, Internet newspaper comment forums, social media – especially Twitter and Facebook – and other new media may be important to monitor. In some countries, observers may need to track sources in multiple languages in order to fully cover the relevant media.

Once a group has decided on the types of media to monitor, they will also need to narrow the focus of content. Observers interested in content affecting the potential for electoral violence will focus on examining only key sources of political information, such as news and commentary (as opposed to, for instance, entertainment or sports pieces). Monitors should examine Op-Eds, television and radio news commentators, news hosts and news pieces to determine whether the tone and content is conducive for peaceful political participation.

Media Sources: What to Look For

When analyzing media sources, LTOs should track three main issues:

- **Hate speech**: This includes the use of any derogatory or intimidating words or slurs against a person or group. Hate speech has malicious undertones and can encourage discrimination and/or violence against a person or group, often evoking racism or other forms of intolerance. It typically includes a 'target' minority that is de-humanized and often encourages taking violent action against that group.

- **Polarizing or inflammatory language**: Polarizing or inflammatory language is intentionally divisive rhetoric that promotes extremism. Media that takes radical sides on issues or events and does not allow for moderate discussion can be polarizing. Language that encourages actions or intentionally stirs fanatical emotions could be considered inflammatory. This type of rhetoric does not seek peaceful compromises or constructive resolutions and instead draws stark partitions among people.

- **Exaggerations, distorted facts and falsehoods**: Irresponsible media coverage can make it difficult to determine what is factual and what is not. However, some media may blur facts due to political bias and in some cases may even lie about particular news items. Purposeful misinformation can be a serious warning sign. It creates an environment of confusion and can hinder rational dialogue among those engaged in the political process. In cases where it is difficult to discern whether a media outlet is reporting false information, citizen monitors should fact-check suspicious or misleading material. Fact-checking means double-checking assertions made by the media through in-depth research and consultation with reliable sources, such as formal statements, official documents and interviews.

Documenting and Reporting

Citizen observers should clearly define what can constitute dangerous speech in their country context, collect information about these problems using standardized forms. These should include, at a minimum, a categorization of "type" of problem (hate speech, polarizing language, misinformation), the source of the problem (media outlet, program, commentator/reporter), the date, the time and a brief description of the problem.[12] Observer groups should consolidate all reports into a central database, so that the data can be analyzed to inform the

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[12.] See Appendix II for sample form.

groups' public outreach and direct engagement of the media, as described in more detail below.

PROMOTING MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY

Citizen monitors have the ability to not only track and report on potentially troubling developments in the media, but to also help create pressure on the media to be accountable for what it publicizes. While there are a variety of methods for promoting media accountability, three of the most common and effective methods are:

- increasing public awareness of media behavior;
- enlisting the support of relevant international actors; and
- directly engaging and/or intervening with media outlets and journalists.

To increase public awareness, citizen observer groups should develop, as part of a larger external communication strategy, a variety of ways to inform the public about media behavior. Depending on what groups deem to be most effective in reaching their target audiences, examples of public outreach products include creating and distributing score cards ranking media outlets on different categories (i.e., hate speech, polarization, distortion of facts), running ads or radio spots, informing opinion leaders and starting social networking campaigns through sites such as Twitter and Facebook. In order to increase their profile and impact, groups may consider issuing separate reports on media accountability independent of their regular LTO reports. These reports could highlight incidents of hate speech, polarizing language and misinformation as well as identify the culpable parties.

By engaging relevant actors in the international community, observer groups can increase pressure on media outlets and journalists to be accountable and responsible in their reporting. Observer groups can engage with human rights groups and international media, as well as media watchdogs or technical assistance providers such as the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), Article XIX, BBC World Service Trust and Internews. Even if there is not a strong NGO or international media presence within the country, these actors can still easily be reached via email, social networking, fax or phone.

Depending on citizen observer groups' strategy and available resources, they may consider more direct engagement with journalists and media houses. This could

Media Codes of Conduct

Monitoring organizations may consider working with media outlets and journalists to sponsor or develop a Media Code of Conduct (sometimes called a Journalist Code of Ethics or a Code of Professional Responsibility). These codes outline standards for media professionalism and responsibility. It may behoove media and journalists to participate in the code development to generate good publicity and ensure rivals agree to the same commitments. However, when media are not willing to be involved in the code development, monitors may have to develop the code themselves and then launch a public campaign to apply pressure on media to agree to the standards. Codes of Conduct are not legally binding – they are typically self-enforcing and informal. However, they provide a baseline of expectations that monitors and the public can use to hold media accountable.

include journalist trainings in which monitors guide reporters on how to fairly and factually cover the electoral process. Some monitoring groups have also developed media Codes of Conduct that outline commitments to responsible journalism.[13] These codes can help media outlets understand their influence on the public debate as it relates to conflict and create obligations and peer pressure to reduce hate speech, polarizing language and rumors.

[13.] A sample media Code of Conduct is included in Appendix IV.

PHOTO CREDITS