
Introduction

To declare an election successful, it must be credible. To achieve credibility, an election must meet international standards, which promote democracy and enhance security and stability.

The election must be based on a reasonable legal framework, which outlines the rules that govern the process. There must be freedom of association of political parties and other stakeholders, which in turn guarantees a competitive election on the basis of universal suffrage in which women, men and youth participate. In addition, there must be freedom of expression, which enables reasonable access to the media, and freedom of movement and assembly, so that political parties and their supporters can campaign freely. Voters also need to be free to express their will via secret ballot, and finally there must be effective legal remedy, which provides faith that the judiciary is an independent arbiter. These critical elements are covered in Articles 19 to 21 and Article 25 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

There are two other conditions that are often contentious: first, that there should be a conducive environment in terms of human rights, and second, that the process needs to be transparent and accountable in order to increase confidence in the conduct of the election.

Newsrooms around the world often say that such conditions should deliver a ‘free and fair’ election, a phraseology that politicians also use. However, international observer groups have moved away from the ‘free and fair’ catch phrase, which they see as having become too simplistic. Instead they call an election either ‘credible’ or ‘not credible’.

As one international expert on elections put it,¹

To reduce an election to a simple issue of free and fair doesn't do justice to the process, which is far more complex than that. Phraseology such as 'free and fair' or 'representing the will of the people' was largely abandoned by international observers a decade ago.

Covering elections presents a big challenge to the media, especially in developing countries where the average age in the newsroom² has dropped significantly. Tight deadlines, knowledge of relevant legislation, the political players and process, adherence

'Covering elections poses one of the most serious challenges to journalists and one of the most exciting times for journalists'.

Daniel Nyirenda
News Editor,
Daily Times, Malawi

to basic ethics and increasingly questions of personal safety all pile pressure on the media.

This book offers the media some ammunition to help deal with this challenge. Journalists in developing countries will find it a particularly useful guide. Our intention is to enable the media to use all tools at their disposal to report an election well, to realise that the coverage of an election is a skill that one should try to master and in doing so promote the democratic process in which citizens can expect balanced information regarding the process and players.

All references to 'media' in this book are in terms of the clear definition at <http://www.techterms.com/definition/media>³ thus:

... various means of communication. For example, television, radio and the newspaper are different types of media. The term can also be used as a collective noun for the press or news reporting agencies.

To this definition we add the Internet, as increasingly the three mediums mentioned have online versions.

The book seeks to build on previous work in this area, such as *Media and Elections: an elections reporting handbook* by Institute of Media, Policy and Civil Society (IMPACS) Associate Ross Howard; *Free and fair: a journalist's guide to improved election reporting in emerging democracies* (Lisa Schnellinger); *Elections Reporting Handbook* (International Federation of Journalists); *International Standards for the Media: briefing notes on basic principles of journalism* (Article 19, Index for Free Expression, Reuters Foundation, and United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation); *Compendium of International Standards for Elections* (European Commission); *Handbook for European Union Election Observation* (European Union); and the reports of Commonwealth Observer Groups (COGs).

The combination of existing, revised or new literature, personal experiences and reports of Commonwealth Observer Groups should provide the media with a solid comparative overview of what is needed to cover an election successfully. The reports of Commonwealth Observer Groups are of particular significance, because they relate experiences in the field. From these, media can determine how they would have reacted had they been in the same position – thereby strategically positioning themselves for when they have to tackle another election.

Following on from this introduction, the book is divided into six chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 put the role of the media in context and outline its role as a sustainer of democracy. Chapter 3 examines significant issues in reporting an election. Chapter 4 deals with technology and innovation and how these have changed the electoral landscape. Chapter 5 examines the guiding principles, such as standards and codes of conduct, while chapter 6 offers a conclusion. At the end of chapters 1–5 there are one or two testimonies from journalists who have covered an election, providing perspectives from their respective countries. These chapters are also illustrated by segments taken from various reports of Commonwealth Observer Groups which, although mild in tone, provide an important pointer to the issues the media must face during elections.