

Election WatchX

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MEDIA FREEDOM & ACCESS TO INFORMATION ESSENTIAL FOR ELECTIONS

Media play a crucial role in the process of ensuring democratic, free and fair elections. This is especially important given the fundamental importance of freedom of expression and freedom of the media in any democratic process.

As the Media Institute of Southern Africa (Misa) puts it: "It is well established that freedom of expression and political debate is fundamental to free, fair and genuinely democratic elections. In order to play their role, the media need both access to information and the freedom to freely and safely communicate their findings. They act as a watchdog, ensuring greater transparency and accountability during the election process, providing citizens with information on their candidates, party policies and the elections process, enabling them to make informed decisions when they cast their votes or engage in public debate. The media are essential to this process, as they are the main source of information for the population. The media also have a responsibility to produce accurate, professional and impartial reports."¹

In a set of guidelines developed by media practitioners in the SADC region, it was noted that, "The role of the media during the entire electoral process is to ensure that voters

make informed choices. The coverage of candidates, parties and electoral processes is in pursuit of this central purpose."² IFEX further notes that, "The media's job is to facilitate a transparent process, give space to the diversity of opinions and perspectives, and provide necessary background, context and analysis."³

In this regard, during the election period – which should be seen in the context of a continuous 5-year period that includes the several activities before, during and after an election (see the article on media in the electoral cycle on the page 3) – the media carry out three essential functions:

Expression Platform

Firstly, the media serve as a platform for expression, creating the space for the voices of contesting parties and candidates to be heard. It is through the media that these political candidates are able to introduce themselves to the public, express their political opinions, convey their development policies, and explain what they would do differently in order to change or improve the status quo. The media also provide a platform for voters to express their concerns, and to commu-

nicate the issues that matter most to them and that could influence their voting behaviour.

Informer

Secondly, media play the role of informer, essentially assisting the ECN to carry its voter education messages to the public. This includes educating eligible voters on general electoral processes, informing them about voter registration exercises, communicating polling arrangements (dates, times for mobile polling stations, locations, etc), and conveying other key information. Importantly, the media also inform voters about the different parties and candidates taking part in the elections. "The media have a duty to provide election coverage that gives the voter comprehensive, accurate and reliable information on all aspects of the electoral process. This information will also help to ensure that the voters know and understand their democratic rights and exercise them free from fear, intimidation or coercion."⁴

Watchdog

And thirdly, the media serve as a watchdog for free and fair elections by uncovering and reporting on abuses of electoral processes and political bias, and promoting transparency as a means to preventing electoral fraud. Beyond the electoral period, the media also carry out their watchdog role by holding politicians and political parties accountable for their election promises, and ensuring that the public is well informed about both the positive and negative developments resulting from those that they have put in power through their vote.

ATI & Media Freedom

As the IPPR has previously noted, in ensuring comprehensive, accurate, impartial and responsible election reporting in order to effectively carry out the three key functions

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- 1 Media Institute of Southern Africa, 2015. Media freedom essential during upcoming 2015 African elections. Retrieved from <http://www.misa.org/component/k2/item/2957-media-freedom-essential-during-upcoming-2015-african-elections?Itemid=101>
- 2 FESmedia Africa, MISA, SADC-Electoral Commissions Forum, OSISA, 2013. Guidelines on Media Coverage of Elections in the SADC Region.
- 3 IFEX, 2015. Botswana: Access to information, balanced coverage essential for fair, credible elections. MISA, 28 October 2014. Retrieved from: http://www.ifex.org/botswana/2014/10/28/elections_observing/
- 4 Ibid.



*This illustration is not meant to be an exhaustive depiction of all the media houses in Namibia.

ABOUT ELECTION WATCH

Election Watch is a bulletin containing electoral analysis and voter education that will appear regularly in the run up to the 2014 National Assembly and Presidential Elections.

It is produced as a PDF download and as a printed newspaper insert. Election Watch is a project of the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR).

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The content of Election Watch is the sole responsibility of the IPPR.

Comments and feedback should be sent to the IPPR, PO Box 6566, Windhoek, Namibia.

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noted above, media houses should ensure that their journalists are familiar with the legislative framework governing the electoral process and are fully conversant with all aspects of the electoral process, including how electoral institutions – in Namibia's case the ECN – operate. In addition journalists should be familiar with national, regional and continental principles and benchmarks on democracy and elections, as well as on election coverage. In fact, to ensure comprehensive and quality coverage of elections, it is advisable for media houses to set up specialised election desks or units within the newsroom.¹

Above and beyond this, however, in order to effectively carry out its role as the 'fourth estate' in contributing to democratic elections, it is critical that the media are able to exercise their freedoms, and that they have access to information. As Right2Info.org explains, "Access to election-related information is widely considered to be essential to the integrity of electoral processes in the democratic world."² This includes, for example, information on party finances, boundary delimitation, and party candidates' backgrounds.

MISA has noted that "concerns about the credibility of, and conduct of, the electoral processes in a number of countries in southern Africa is a result of the opaqueness and secrecy that, at times is part of the conduct of elections", suggesting that "there is need to mainstream the principles of access to information within the broader socio-economic development and democratisation agenda in our region."³

In this regard, the following key principles from various guidelines on media coverage of elections should apply, with respect to access to information and media freedom:

- Media freedom is one of the basic conditions for a pluralistic and democratic society.
- The right to freedom of expression is a fundamental human right and a necessary condition in a democratic system. Therefore, autonomous and pluralistic media are essential to a free and open society and for providing

information necessary to holding those in power to account.

- Independent and free media are of particular importance in safeguarding human rights and fundamental freedoms.
- The media, both state-controlled and private, should provide fair and equitable coverage of parties and candidates contesting elections.
- Media self-regulation should be promoted as the best way to address/correct journalists' professional mistakes.
- The media should be allowed access to all election activities, including rallies, media conferences, candidates, parties and electoral management institutions and officials.
- Editorial opinion must be clearly distinguished from fact or news.
- A diversity of opinions representing the broadest possible range of views and ideas especially those of contesting candidates and political parties should be allowed across all media platforms.
- Media which choose to endorse candidates or parties must ensure the endorsement is clearly presented as opinion and is not part of its news reports.
- Analysis should provide insights based on research and diversity of expert opinions which enable voters to get a deeper understanding of processes, issues and candidates.
- Debate and discussion platforms, which include representatives of all shades of political opinion, experts and

civil society representatives, should be organised.

- As far as possible, and especially in the electronic media candidates (including presidential) should be given an opportunity to debate with each other in moderated programmes.
- Media must, without censoring and undermining the freedom of expression of anyone, avoid and preclude the use of language which constitutes hate speech incites violence or promotes stereotypes.
- The media have an obligation to reflect the diversity and plurality of voices in society in its coverage including those of marginalised groups. Reporting should be gender-balanced and sensitive, treating men and women equally as news sources and subjects.
- Media covering elections are obliged to inform the electorate of the election results in a comprehensive way, as they become available, whether provisional or final, as released by the Electoral Management Body. Journalists should avoid reporting unofficial results and take special care when predicting final results based on partial results available.

Adapted from the Guidelines on Media Coverage of Elections in the SADC region, Media Institute for Southern Africa (2012) and the Handbook on Media Monitoring and Election Observation, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (2012)

- 1 IPPR, 2014. Media play a crucial role in fair elections.
- 2 Right2Info.org, 2015.
- 3 MISA, 2015.

ELECTION REPORTING: IS MY STORY COMPLETE?

EVERY JOURNALIST AND EDITOR SHOULD ASK THESE QUESTIONS BEFORE REPORTING ELECTION NEWS.

1. Is this story accurate? Are the facts and names correct and do I believe the information is true? Have I made every effort to confirm the information is true?
2. Is this story impartial and balanced fairly? Does it include both sides or alternative views and does it present the news without giving any special favour to one party or candidate?
3. Is this responsible journalism? Was this news obtained without bribes or illegal actions and does it protect sources and not violate the election and press laws?
4. Is this story voter-focused? Does it have significant news for the voters? Does it present the concerns of voters to the politicians?
5. Is this the whole picture? Do these words, photographs, television clips or audio-tapes give a true picture of the most important thing that happened at the event?
6. Will this news story help to make the voters well-informed, so they can vote wisely, in their own best interest?
7. Is this election free and fair? Is there other news about this election that should be reported?

*Source: Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society, 2003. Media and Elections: An Elections Reporting Handbook

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GOOD JOURNALISM IN AN ELECTION

Accuracy

Getting the correct information is the most important part of good journalism. Everything that is reported must be described accurately – the spelling of the candidates' names, the words they use and the precise numbers and descriptions of people, places and things. Candidates and voters can be emotional during elections. Their words must be reported carefully to accurately reveal their meaning, and to explain the context without exaggerating partial meanings.

In the news business, reporters will rush to get it first. But their greater priority is to first get it right. Voters will not talk to journalists if they fear journalists will not report their words accurately, or will not describe things as they really are.

Impartiality (Fair Balance)

Almost every code of good journalism puts importance on impartiality, or on not taking sides. To achieve impartiality, a good journalist will seek to produce a report that is balanced. To be balanced is to include both sides. When one political candidate makes an accusation or a promise in an election campaign speech, a professional reporter will seek reaction from other candidates and include it in the report to create a bal-

anced story. Looking for more than one opinion helps overcome the appearance of bias or favouring only one side. But the balanced report must also be fair. It may give more emphasis or more attention to one candidate over another in a news story because of the significance of the candidate's words or actions at that event, or at that time. At some other time, in some other story, the balance may change to fairly represent the significance of some other side. It requires more work to achieve a fair balance in every story, but it is essential in professional journalism. There are always at least two sides to every story.

Even if they work for one media that supports one party, professional journalists try to be unbiased and include balance in their reporting. Even if they work for the state or government media, their stories should include news about the opposition parties.

This is balance. As much as possible, the balance should be fair. Private media owners and state media should keep political comments and opinions separate from the news.

Many voters will not talk to reporters whom they fear will only report one party's views. Voters who distrust reporters will say what they think the reporter wants to hear, but they will

not always say the truth.

There is another meaning to impartiality. Impartiality also means that the professional reporter is not a leader in any political group or movement. If a journalist is known as a leading activist, his or her reports will be considered biased and not credible even if they do have fair balance. A journalist's impartiality means that a reporter must not take an active role in any election as a campaigner, offer financial or other support to a party or take gifts from a party.

Responsibility

Journalists have obligations to the people they report about, and to the society to whom they report the news. Journalists have a responsibility to protect their sources when their sources cannot be named. Many people will not tell journalists important news about political corruption if they fear their names will be revealed.

Responsible journalists also use only honest methods to obtain the news, which means their work should be guided by internationally accepted professional standards.

*Source: Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society, 2003. Media and Elections: An Elections Reporting Handbook

THE MEDIA AND THE ELECTORAL CYCLE

The Electoral Cycle is “a visual planning and training tool”¹ that graphically illustrates the various components and stages of carrying out an election. In the Namibian context, the cycle covers a 5-year period. It does not look at Elections as a single (voting) event, but rather focuses on the entire cycle as a continuous process, covering the legal framework, planning and implementation activities required of the electoral management body, the training and education of election officials, voter registration, campaigning by political parties and candidates, voting operations on elections day, the verification of results, and post-election activities.

As the IPPR has previously advised, it is vital that the media do not see elections as simply a few weeks of campaigning, the polling

days, and the announcement of results. Instead, the media have a duty to provide election coverage that gives the voter comprehensive, accurate and reliable information on all aspects of the electoral process. This information will also help to ensure that the voters know and understand their democratic rights and exercise them free from fear, intimidation or coercion. This means that the media coverage of elections should start with covering electoral reform, delimitation (demarcation of constituency boundaries), and voter registration long before the campaigning starts in earnest.²

The media have an important role to play throughout the electoral cycle, based on the three key activities that they perform during an election – i.e. (1) to serve as a ‘platform for parties and platform

for parties and candidates to express their political opinions and convey their policies’; (2) to ‘provide information to voters on electoral processes, such as voter registration, polling arrangements etc’; and (3) to act as a watchdog for free and fair elections by uncovering and reporting on abuses of electoral processes and political bias³.

In line with these activities, the media should be able to cover a range of issues and concerns raised at different points of the election cycle.

In the context of Namibia’s upcoming local authority and regional council elections, for example, the media have at their disposal a plethora of important topics, including some of the examples below:

Stage in the Electoral Cycle		Topics and questions the media should cover
Pre-Election Period		
Legal Framework		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are some of the key issues emerging from the Electoral Act No 5 of 2014, that impact how the local authority and regional council elections are held.• How does the new Electoral Act change the way in which these elections will be held (compared to previous years)?• Are all voters free to hear and discuss the parties and issues without fear?• Are voters fully informed about the demarcation of regional and constituency boundaries (i.e. delimitation), have they been consulted in the process, and is information regarding this process made public?• Are all qualified parties and candidates allowed to run in the election?• Are candidates representing minorities, regions and different political opinions all allowed to seek election?
Planning and Implementation		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is the ECN funded well enough to effectively carry out its responsibilities effectively?• Has the election calendar been announced in good time, and communicated to the electorate? Are the timelines realistic? Do they provide sufficient time for citizens to respond on issues that concern them?• Is the election commission seen as impartial, independent and honest?• Are any powerful interests spending large amounts of money to support one particular party?• Are the parties willing to disclose where they get their money?
Training and Education		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have election officials been adequately trained on the use of all aspects of the electoral cycle. Are election officials well-versed in the use of new technologies being used in the election?• Has the ECN put in place strategies to deal with lapses in their 2014 training of election officials – particularly in the use of Voter Verification devices and the Electronic Voting Machines?• Has voter education been extensively conducted? Are voters well aware of the nature of the election, their registration requirements, the parties and candidates up for election, etc?• Do voters understand their role and the importance of voting, and do they know their choices (per the Bill of bill of fundamental voters rights and duties referred to in the Electoral Act of 2014)?
Voter Registration		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are all citizens on the voters register eligible to vote?• Has the voter register been cleaned, and is it up to date (no duplicates, removal of deceased)?
Electoral Campaign		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do parties threaten voters or election officials or tell voters for whom to vote?• Do parties or officials try to bribe voters with money, large gifts, or promises of jobs?• Are all parties able to hold public meetings without fear?• Are the election rules and limits applied equally to all parties?• Are the police and army protecting all parties as they campaign, distribute information and hold public meetings?• Are government officials neutral and not using government money or resources such as vehicles to favour one party?• Is the political party that is in government making many announcements of new projects just when the election campaign begins? This is unfair to the opposition parties who cannot use government money this way.• Is the state media (i.e. NBC) providing reliable coverage of all the candidates and parties? Is the coverage accurate, impartial, responsible, and fair?• Does the private media – newspapers, radio and television – provide reliable and fair reporting; and treat all parties’ advertising equally?
Election Period		
Voting Operations and Election Day		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do women and minorities feel safe in voting?• Do voters who cannot read easily understand the ballots? Has appropriate accommodation been made for blind voters?• Do voters easily understand the voting instructions?• Are there enough EVMs, and officials to observe the voting and count the ballots?• Are there security arrangements to protect people going to vote, as well as to protect the EVMs being used in the election?
Verification of Results		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are there international and independent observers who are monitoring the election, and how do they see the election commission?• Does the election commission investigate and stop violations of the election law? Are violators penalized in any way?
Post-Election Period		
Post Election		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Does the election commission respond quickly to complaints from the media, the voters and the political parties about all alleged violations of the election laws?• Are the media, non-governmental organizations and international observers able to monitor and report to the public about the election process without interference or fear?

¹Sources, IMPACS (2004), IPPR (2014)

Beyond the coverage that the media can provide during the election cycle, there are also a number of aspects in the election cycle that both media houses and the Electoral Commission of Namibia should pay attention to in making effective use of the media as a crucial education platform.

In carrying out its voter education function, the ECN can and should play a role in supporting media to effectively report on national and regional elections; build media capacity to use information at its disposal to write information-rich and voter-focused articles and stories; monitor media election coverage with the aim of heightening accuracy, impartiality and responsibility; and build political reporting capacity to ensure that citizens are getting full information on the electoral process and the parties and candidates up for election.

This would be in line with the ECN’s voter education responsibilities stipulated in the Electoral Act of 2014. There, it is stated that “49 (1) The Commission must, when supervising, directing, controlling and promoting voter and civic education (a) pursue the objective to make the meaning and

purpose of elections well understood by the electorate; (b) create public awareness on elections, democracy building and political tolerance; (c) develop, revise and update voter and civic education materials on a continuous basis; (e) design a multi-media campaign strategy that identifies information channels; (f) encourage civic organisations, the media and political parties to support the voter and civic education program of the Commission,”⁴ amongst other things. These responsibilities call for a strong relationship with the media, that ensures that while media houses remain independent in their reporting, they are well-informed and capacitated to carry out accurate, impartial and responsible coverage of the election – including criticism of the electoral management body.

Additionally, media houses should ensure strong election coverage by providing training opportunities for their journalists on electoral matters in order to enhance their capacity on this type of reporting; delegating election reporting tasks to designated journalists; and ensure voter-focused reporting

that serves to inform and educate eligible voters on their rights, responsibilities and the choices at their voting disposal, and that ensures voters’ voices are heard. Furthermore, beyond the pre-electoral and electoral periods, media houses should play a key role – as a watchdog – in holding government accountable for its election promises, and ensuring that the development targets for the posts to which candidates and parties are elected are actually met.

⁴UNDP, Media and Elections: A Guide for Electoral Practitioners, April 2014

1 ACE Project, 2015.
2 IPPR, 2014. Media play a crucial role in fair elections.
3 IPPR, 2014. Media play a crucial role in fair elections.
4 Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2014. Electoral Act No. 5 of 2014

PEOPLE BEFORE POLITICIANS

ISSUES BEFORE EVENTS

Among the weaknesses of much election reporting is a tendency to base reports on the activities and words of politicians rather than the concerns of ordinary citizens. Similarly, it is often the easiest and cheapest option for reporters to follow events rather than investigate issues.

For example, much election reportage consists of covering the press conferences and press releases of politicians and the electoral management body. However, perhaps especially in the case of local and regional elections, there is a need to establish the concerns of local people. What kinds of services do they want? What improvements do they want to see politicians providing in their areas? What do they think of their elected politicians and are they consulted about key political decisions that affect their lives. In Namibia, in-depth reporting on regional and local issues is limited by the fact that so much journalism is rooted in Windhoek and about the capital city and a few other urban areas. Although comprehensive national coverage is expensive, ways of reaching out to often marginalised communities and groups should be explored by media outlets.

In Namibia the Polytechnic of Namibia's Echoes News Service adopted a different approach to election reporting in both 2004 and 2009.

The aims of the student news agency were:

- To foster freedom of expression, diversity, non-discrimination, gender equality and accurate and balanced reporting in and through the media. Its target audience is

the Namibian people.

- To bring to the attention of the nation the issues and news that affect the majority of the Namibian people.
- To access the voices and perspectives of women and men, girls and boys as the primary sources for its news-gathering.
- To shift the criteria of what is newsworthy from events to issues, and from those in positions of prominence and power, to the experiences of people in communities throughout Namibia.

As part of the 2004 and 2009 projects, sources were not selected because of their prominence or power, but because they could speak with informed voices on the issues members of a particular community were experiencing. Student journalists were trained and then sent out to communities across the length and breadth of Namibia. Many of the reports produced by Echoes News Agency were featured in The Namibian newspaper.

Stories would seek to capture the views and expectations of community members about the elections, and what their needs are in relation to service-delivery, governance, economic issues, gender-mainstreaming and gender-based violence, and HIV and AIDS.

Since most sources who speak on political issues in the media are men, the Echoes project deliberately sought to balance female and male sources. Female experts were prominently featured. Single source stories were also avoided and instead a variety of voices were featured in the reports produced by Echoes.

The Echoes project created opportunities for citi-

zens to have their say on essential matters regarding the election process and social issues in their regions, constituencies and local authority areas. It is important that journalists across the media in Namibia use these kinds of approaches when reporting on elections in order to give the fullest picture of what elections are all about - giving voice to the concerns of ordinary citizens.

Examples of topics covered by Echoes' trainee journalists just prior to elections

TOPIC	FOCUS
Health and Housing Plague in Arandis	Lack of development in health and housing sectors
Bucket System Blues	Poor sanitation
Proximity of Clubs to Schools: A Crime-field	Abuse of alcohol and other drugs amongst the youth
Maintenance of Rural Roads: A Priority for development	Unless rural roads are well maintained, certain communities would be cut off from the rest of the nation
Government absent in Arandis development	A lack of involvement in community projects in Arandis
No Trust – No Vote	Characteristics of Party candidates determine whether to vote for them or not
Unemployment – The Harsh Reality	Levels of unemployment on the rise

*Article based in part on "Missing the beat: mainstream media mirror relevance of community media in election coverage in Namibia" by Emily M Brown, Polytechnic of Namibia



The delivery of basic services like sanitation, water supply, and rubbish collection are often crucial concerns for ordinary voters

WHERE IS THE VOTER'S VOICE?

An election campaign places heavy demands upon journalists. The political parties try to create news and attract votes by giving speeches, conducting news conferences, making promises and attacking each other's policies and advertising.

But an election is not for the politicians. It is for the people. It is the voters who make the most important decisions about whom to elect.

During an election there should be more journalism that gives a voice to what the ordinary people want and what they are saying. The political candidates should ideally respond to the voters' voices. And then the voters can decide. All this is done through the media.

The media should report on the people's agenda and not just on the policies and promises made by the candidates. To find this agenda, journalists need to think like the people, not like the politicians. People think about what the political parties will do about the neighbourhood problems. They want the media to ask the parties what they will do, and bring the answers back to the people.

Reporting the voices of voters requires more work because more people must be interviewed, instead of just repeating the words of the candidates. But it is journalism people will trust, because they know it reflects their concerns. If people trust their media, they will also speak up for the media and defend it if the government or other interests try to silence good journalism.

*Source: Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society, 2003. *Media and Elections: An Elections Reporting Handbook*

WHAT IS THE IPPR?

The Institute for Public Policy Research was established in 2001 as a not-for-profit organisation with a mission to deliver, independent, analytical, critical yet constructive research on social, political and economic issues which affect development Namibia. The IPPR was established in the belief that development is best promoted through free and critical debate informed by quality research. The IPPR is independent of government, political parties, business, trade unions and other interest groups and is governed by a board of directors consisting of Monica Koep (chairperson), Graham Hopwood, Ndiitah Nghipondoka-Robiati, Daniel Motinga, Justin Ellis and Michael Humavindu.

Anyone can receive the IPPR's research free of charge by contacting the organisation at

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