

# RESPONSIBLE MEDIA COVERAGE OF ELECTIONS

## A Training Guide





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Introduction.....3
- Key principles for the responsible coverage of elections.....4
  - Some principles for journalists covering an election.....4
  - The role of journalists during elections.....5
    - A journalist’s civic role.....5
    - Relaying the population’s voice.....6
    - Guaranteeing the smooth conduct of elections.....7
    - Encouraging social cohesion and reconciliation.....8
    - Contributing to the accountability of political actors.....9
- How to cover elections responsibly? A Case Study.....10
  - Appropriate radio formats.....10
    - Round Tables.....10
    - Interviews.....12
    - Interactive Programmes.....13
    - Other formats to consider.....14
  - Media Synergy.....14
    - Necessary means to set up a radio station synergy during an election.....15
    - Example operations/plan.....16
    - Content of programmes.....17
- Conclusion.....18
- Annexes.....19
- Notes.....26



Elections correspond to periods of heightened media coverage and reporting. With each political party wanting to lead the country, these transitional times are often wrought with competitive language, rising tensions, and occasional political violence, sometimes even resulting in violent conflict. The media is the primary catalyst for these dynamics.

Therefore, the role of journalists is particularly crucial during the election process. In an often fragile context, and with a mind to conflict prevention, journalists must depend on their professional skills. They must commit to delivering thorough, verified, and unbiased information, pulled from a number of diverse sources, to their listeners or readers. At the same time, they must refrain from publishing information that encourages divisions or antagonistic discussions, which are likely to incite violence or jeopardise social cohesion.

Following the guidelines found in this Training Guide, journalists covering elections in fragile contexts will be able to contribute to a fair, transparent, and peaceful process. Through the responsible practice of professional journalism, journalists will fulfil their role in the promotion of democracy and respect of pluralism.

Thus, this Guide is designed for journalists covering elections on the African continent, particularly in situations of extreme tension or post-conflict reconstruction. It aims to encourage good journalistic practices before, during and after elections in order to manage conflict that can arise during this transitional period. It gathers both theoretical aspects and more pragmatic elements, providing journalists with essential tools to cover elections responsibly.

This Guide is based on the activities that Search for Common Ground (SFCG) has conducted in Burundi and Guinea, with the support of the National Democratic Institute, Radio France Internationale, USAID, Swiss Cooperation, and the European Union. Synergy Strategies are covered in detail. In both of these Sub-Saharan African countries, Media Synergy Strategies have been used during elections, including the 2005 and 2010 elections in Burundi and the 2010 election in Guinea. The Guide has also benefited from SFCG's experience in Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda. Reading through it, journalists will learn from the experience of their peers on the African continent who have actively participated in responsible media election coverage.

# KEY PRINCIPLES FOR THE RESPONSIBLE COVERAGE OF ELECTIONS



Adhering to a number of key principles will allow journalists to provide credible information to their audiences before, during, and after the elections.

## SOME PRINCIPLES FOR JOURNALISTS COVERING AN ELECTION

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The principles below should be the basis for any media work during elections. Following these principles allows journalists to efficiently contribute to the peace process in their countries, which is all the more crucial during election times.

**5 key principles** for the responsible coverage of elections:

1. Get documentation on the election process
2. Report the facts in a timely manner
3. Verify all information
4. Present the platforms of the different candidates
5. Give voice to all parties and voters while remaining neutral and avoiding manipulation.

In order to achieve efficient and impartial elections coverage, journalists must first prepare by acquiring basic knowledge on any relevant legal documentation. To be able to inform others, the journalist should first be well-informed. It is important for journalists to prepare for their reporting by educating themselves on the different institutions involved in the organisation of elections, on campaign rules and regulations, on the format of the ballot papers, and on the procedures for the announcement of the results. Journalists covering the elections also need to have some knowledge of legal documents, such as the Constitution, the Electoral Code, and any journalist regulations associated with their work, so that they are respected and trusted by the various electoral actors while they watch and report on the unfolding elections. Understanding the potential political gains and losses, the candidates' profiles, and the expectations of the population is also part of the basic knowledge a journalist must have when covering an election.

These different elements will allow journalists to better understand the electoral context of their countries, and thus better inform the populations by facilitating interactive discussion and answering any questions or concerns listeners might have. By meticulously preparing their media productions, journalists will appear more credible in the population's view and limit the propagation of rumours or disinformation, which often fuel tensions during an electoral process. This is all the more true in post-conflict countries, where divisions between groups have not yet been reconciled and they remain at risk for manipulation.

Once the journalist is well informed of the electoral context, they can then focus on relating facts to the population. When reporting these facts, the journalist must not content him or herself with the official discourse between politicians, but go beyond these official declarations. In particular, the journalist

should report on the concerns of the population as a whole, including both rural and urban voters, as well as the various political stakes in the election. As should be the case for any media report, the journalist must verify the facts he or she presents and avoid spreading rumours to the audience. Useful programming could include, for example, on-the-ground reports on the situation and developments; questions gathered from citizens from different geographic or ethnic backgrounds; or featured experts appearing on the radio to talk about the issues. An expert in legal matters could for instance enlighten listeners on the role and the responsibilities of a future elected representative. A member of the Electoral Commission, on the other hand, could give precise information on the development of the voting process on the day of elections. Journalists should find appropriate guests depending on how far the election process has advanced and what issues are most relevant to the audience at that time.

Besides the five fundamental principles noted in the textbox above that each journalist should follow while covering an election, **independence, neutrality, honesty, and fairness** are also crucial elements that build journalistic credibility. Journalists must refrain from allowing their personal opinions or preferences to sway their reporting.

He or she must avoid wearing distinctive signs indicating party or candidate affiliation. They must refuse to broadcast songs, spots, or press releases favouring or criticising a candidate or a political party. Finally, to guarantee their independence, journalists cannot accept presents or payment from any candidate or political party. Moreover, to ensure pluralism is efficiently respected during the campaign, all candidates must have equal access to the media to be able to present their ideas and political platforms to voters. Journalists must ensure that they give the floor, to the extent possible, equally to all candidates. Journalists can for instance invite candidates one after the other to their programme to discuss their platforms, or even facilitate a debate between different candidates. When a journalist broadcasts a candidate's speech, he or she can broadcast reactions from the opposing candidates or supporters as well to balance each position.

The Declaration of the Principles of Freedom of Speech in Africa, adopted by the African Commission of Human and People's Rights in October 2002, provides that "freedom of speech compels authorities to adopt positive measures to promote diversity:

- Making information and opinions available to the public
- Ensuring pluralist access to the media and other means of communication."

## ROLE OF JOURNALISTS DURING ELECTIONS

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### *A Journalist's Civic Role*

The roles and responsibilities of journalists during election times are pivotal. During the electoral campaign, journalists help inform the public so that they can make responsible decisions on Election Day. It is important that programming is informational, and that it seeks to educate the audience about different aspects of the election process. The code of conduct adopted in Togo reminds journalists that it is essential for "the voter to be well informed to form their own opinion freely and make decisions

with full knowledge of the facts” (See Annex 1). Journalists have a role to play in providing voters with information on the elections and on technical specifics such as how to register for the elections or how to vote on Election Day. These aspects allow for a more informed population, and also encourage higher voting participation.

To enable voters to choose a candidate who represents their interests and opinions, journalists should try to provide as much information as possible on the policies and platforms of the different candidates. A journalist can present divergent points of view by interviewing the candidates or analysing their speeches, if necessary with an expert assisting him/her or a representative of Civil Society. Interactive programme formats will allow listeners to ask specific questions on the candidates’ points. Presenting candidates’ proposed policies will also allow journalists and citizens to monitor the implementation of these promised policies, once representatives are elected.

See for instance below a list of the first five radio programmes produced by SFCG Rwanda during the campaign for the presidential election of August 2010, which clearly had an educational content:

- **Episode 1: Why vote? (Specifics on the voting process)**
- **Episode 2: Vote for whom? (Political platform and portrait of the candidates) ;**
- **Episode 3 : Duties and responsibilities of the president;**
- **Episode 4: How to vote? (Conditions to register, place to vote, etc.) ;**
- **Episode 5 : The electoral campaign ; process and practice**

It is important to inform listeners as much on the voting process as on the candidates and their platforms. The journalist will thus accomplish his or her civic duty by informing the population on the electoral stakes and by encouraging the public to also accomplish their civic duty by voting in large numbers, which will increase the legitimacy of both elected authorities and the positions they hold.

### *Relaying the population’s voice*

The election does not only concern the participating candidates and the political parties. Elections are also an important opportunity for ordinary people to express themselves, relate what issues are most important to their country, region, community, or family, and why these issues matter to them. Giving the opportunity to people to speak out during elections is very important. It lets candidates know the aspirations and concerns of the population, and allows citizens ownership of the process and a more active participation, ensuring a more representative government. The journalist must encourage the population to express their opinions by offering interactive programmes during which listeners can call in directly or by going out and reporting from the field, meeting with the population in different regions of the country, including the country side, and interviewing them. Journalists must pay particular attention to groups that are traditionally marginalised by their society, such as women, youth, or any other vulnerable group, and ensure that their voice and concerns are heard during the campaign.

The Declaration on Fundamental Principles concerning the Contribution of the Mass Media to Strengthening Peace and International Understanding, to the Promotion of Human Rights and to Countering Racism, Apartheid and Incitement to War of 18 November, 1978 provides in Article 2 that: ***“It is important for information media to answer to the concerns of the population and individuals, thus favouring public’s participation to information design.”***



By facilitating exchanges between citizens and candidates in a neutral way, journalists can contribute to the inclusive and participative character of elections and strengthen the link between represented people and representatives, thus increasing the democratic character of the election.

### *Guaranteeing the smooth conduct of the elections*

To encourage the smooth conduct of an election, the journalist also has to play a role as an election monitor to allow for better transparency in the voting process. On the Election Day, journalists can go to polling stations and watch the different steps of the process. In some cases, they will have to obtain accreditation from the Electoral Commission before being permitted to report on the polling station. They will then be able to report to their listeners or to voters on the process and announce any breaches or violations in the rules that may have been committed. The journalist will have to ask the following questions: What time did the polling station open? Were observers there at the opening? Did we verify that the ballot boxes were empty? What were the security

conditions? Were people able to vote freely without pressure or threats? Were all the ballots included and accounted for? Etc.

Steps to follow to cover efficiently the elections on Election Day and for the announcement of results:

- Observing the election process in one or more polling stations
- Not announcing the results, even partially, before the closing of the last polling station
- After the closing of polling stations, citing the sources in case of release of partial and temporary results (only the results appearing in reports signed by parties' representatives can be announced)
- Watching the operation of the organ counting votes and announcing the results
- Announcing as definitive results only those provided by the responsible authorities

Regarding the announcement of the results, a particular stage that is often a source of conflict between the different parties, the journalist must pay close attention to the activities of the actors in charge of counting the ballots, particularly the Electoral Commission, who is usually in charge of this stage. Journalists should respect the Electoral Commission's regulations while monitoring these activities. In most situations, before the closing of the last polling station at the national level, no partial or definite result can be released to the public, as this honour is usually reserved for the Electoral Commission, who is responsible for overseeing the vote tally. A journalist offering a responsible coverage of the elections has to respect this rule, as it applies to all. In fact, estimating early results before the end of the vote could influence individuals who have not yet voted. Moreover, a premature announcement of unverified results can create unnecessary trouble among the supporters of different candidates.

Once all the polling stations are closed and until the official proclamation of the results by the Electoral Commission, the journalists must indicate precisely the source of all the numbers relating to the vote which they

release. They also have to mention every time their partial and provisory/temporary character. In all cases, journalists must comply with the press rules set up for the election period by the press regulation bodies of their country.

However, the role of the journalist does not end with the casting of votes. In fact, when the election is completely over and the counting starts, journalists must ensure the monitoring of the operations of the Electoral Commission, and the timeliness of the processing and dissemination of the provisional results.

The journalist has to work in tight collaboration with the electoral institutions. Finally, the journalist has to wait for the official proclamation of the election results by the authorised institution before publishing the definite results.

With the help of local partners for the content of the show and the support of the UN radio station ONUCI FM for the broadcast, the Côte d'Ivoire SFCG studios produced a series of radio shows to encourage an end to the crisis following the contested presidential elections of 2010. The subjects covered addressed the following themes:

- "After the election, it is not war time,"
- "Exchange on the values and priorities for the pacific management of the post-election crisis," and
- "Women's suggestions for a calm and peaceful environment."

Public Service Announcements (PSAs) have also been produced and disseminated on the generic theme: "I love my country." In these PSAs, speakers discussed the positive attitudes one should adopt when one claims to like his country. In the sensitive context, SFCG's journalists emphasized values such as **unity, respect** for democratic rules or the **peaceful management of crises**. SFCG particularly focused on moderation when processing information and on the diversity of speakers in their programmes. Beyond guaranteeing balance in the programme, one of the lead principles of SFCG in this context is to offer **positive voices and alternatives to violence and conflicts** to its listeners.

### *Encouraging social cohesion and reconciliation*

In countries experiencing a post-conflict situation, journalists have to go beyond a simple narration of the facts if they wish to engage in promoting peace and consolidating democracy, both of which are often fragile in such countries. When reporting or hosting a show, journalists must avoid being a simple window into the crises and conflict between opposing sides. The media has to avoid being used as an "instrument" serving a particular party. On the contrary, journalists must try to underline the common ground between candidates or give voice to neutral and apolitical people such as analysts and observers.

Information professionals can play an important role in peace promotion by disseminating peace and tolerance messages when the electoral campaign takes a violent turn, or even give voice to political figures of moderate civil society members who will thus have the opportunity to share their message with the population. Once the elections are over and the results are validated, journalists will be able to devote part of their broadcast to promoting reconciliation between the parties that faced each other during the elections. Find below examples of the role media can play in promoting peace and reconciliation during tense post-election times, as was the case for the presidential vote in Côte d'Ivoire whose results were particularly controversial, giving way to a deep country crisis:



### *Contributing to the accountability of political actors*

Finally media has a role to play regarding the accountability of political actors to the public. During their programmes or interviews, journalists can remind political actors of the commitments they have made during their campaigns. Generally speaking, before an election, representatives of the main political parties must sign a code of conduct or commit to the acceptance of electoral results. In this context, the role of journalists can consist of reminding politicians and the public of these commitments both during the campaign and once the elections are over and the results have been released.

# HOW TO COVER THE ELECTIONS IN A RESPONSIBLE WAY?

## A CASE STUDY



After mastering the key principles as detailed in Section I and upon taking into account the role journalists should play in covering elections in a responsible manner that can help strengthen democratic institutions, the journalist must also have knowledge of certain practical aspects. The journalist must be knowledgeable of the different formats of radio programmes. There is a series of formats particularly appropriate for the responsible coverage of elections. Journalists should also be knowledgeable of another tool put into practice by SFCG in several countries during the election process: the Media Synergy.

### APPROPRIATE RADIO FORMATS

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#### ROUNDTABLES

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Presented in the local or national language of the country by a journalist with experience in moderating debates, a roundtable can create a space for discussion between civil society (youth or women associations, unions, etc.), political candidates, the government, and citizens. During the election period, a roundtable is an opportunity to bring together the various actors with different perspectives to discuss the elections. In this neutral space, a journalist can assist the protagonists in finding solutions to the problems facing the population and can facilitate a profound discussion about the programmes and projects of each candidate.

1) Identify participants: a show in the format of a roundtable will bring together a large number of guests (the number depends on the length of the show, but beyond four, the debate is difficult to control). These guests should be able to communicate informed views in a clear manner. The choice of roundtable participants is therefore a critical point in the production of a show on the responsible coverage of elections. The following criteria can be used to guide the selection of roundtable presenters:

- Their strong knowledge of the electoral process ;
- Their credibility within the community ;
- Their ability to communicate in the local language.

2) Prepare a roundtable: Once the host has determined the theme he wishes to address, such as “The role of the parliament and the expectations of the population vis-à-vis the parliament” or “The place reserved for women by political parties in the upcoming elections,”<sup>1</sup> he/she has to prepare for the show by researching the theme in depth. Among the sources of information that a journalist can consult are media sites, libraries, internet databases, academics, or other experts. Journalists should always keep in mind that the sources used must be considered reliable resources. The next step is for the journalist to contact the roundtable participants, previously identified, in order to confirm their participation and to allow enough time to meet with them prior to the show in order to prepare a profile on these future

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<sup>1</sup> These subjects are examples from Roundtable Programmes that were produced by SFCG in Burundi in order to facilitate the country’s election process that enrolled over the period of May to September 2010.

guests. The host can use these profiles to introduce them prior to the beginning of the roundtable. Below are examples of preparing a roundtable for the two suggested themes:

- In the case of the second example of a roundtable theme mentioned above, “The role of the parliament and the expectations of the population vis-à-vis members of the parliament,” the host has to have knowledge of the constitutional mandate of members of parliament. He or she should gather information on the term limits of members of parliament as described by the Constitution. Among the potential participants for this round table, the host can invite members of parliament or even experts in politics while ensuring he or she relays the voice of citizens by asking them questions on the issues they face daily.
- In the case of the second example of a round table mentioned above, “The place reserved for women by political parties in the upcoming elections,” the host has to do a status report of women’s representation in the main political parties of the country and question the representatives of these parties regarding the practical measures they have implemented or are considering to implement in order to ensure a better representation of women. The host will also have to ensure he or she gives voice not only to women in politics but also to the representatives of women associations, women leaders, and to ordinary citizens.

3) Defining the **code of conduct** at a roundtable: for the roundtable to remain civil and constructive, and not simply consist of a number of individual monologues but fruitful discussion, the host has to define the code of conduct by which he or she and the roundtable participants will have to abide. Here is a series of rules that will allow the host to produce a responsible programme:

- Gaining participants’ trust: Building trust will be crucial to encouraging active participation and constructive input during the round table. To build trust with the participants, the host has to try to **meet with the guests before the programme**, even if only briefly, in a place where they can relax and get to know each other. This will allow them to be at ease and consider some of the topics the host plans to address during the show. This first encounter will also allow the host to impart to his or her guests “the rules of the game” and to explain to them his or her role as a representative of the listeners. It is also important, right before the recording of the programme, to **have a place where they can relax** and to offer refreshments to the guests so that they can relax before they go on the air.
- Managing time and supervising dialogue: A good round table host will have to share speaking time equally between guests and make sure their answers are not too long; avoiding monologues to favour dialogue. The host must not hesitate **to interrupt** politely if necessary, when **the speakers** speak too long, drift away from the topic, or use offensive language towards the opposing candidate or a group of the population. The host must not hesitate to press a topic when a participant avoids a question. He or she also should intercede when a speaker voices fallacies or condemnable comments. The host has to show authority in case of an escalation (sound chaos, aggressiveness, etc.) to calm everybody down and be a mediator to bridge the gaps between diverging positions.

4) Synthesis of the **principal ideas** at the end of the programme: to allow listeners to understand the principal elements of the debate mentioned during the round table, the host should summarise the debate as the programme draws to a close. To do so, the host should **take notes** during the programme

to be able to briefly and accurately summarise the main messages of the different roundtable participants at the end of the programme.

### Practical tips to host a good round table

- Look for clarification;
- Repeat the essential questions;
- Centre the debate;
- Underline the central question(s) of the discussion;
- Reword a question if necessary by putting it into context or by addressing it from a different angle;
- Bring the facts forward;
- Encourage reflection;
- Know the topics of discussion of ordinary citizens and regular listeners;
- Orient the discussion towards positive aspects instead of focusing on negative aspects;
- Identify, synthesise and express the public opinion clearly;
- Identify the positions of different actors and incite adversaries to discuss the interests they share;
- Appease violent feelings using humour for instance.
- Act as a mediator between adversaries;
- Be tolerant, impartial, and contain yourself;
- Express yourself clearly and be confident;
- Host a serious debate by keeping in mind that the “the public is listening to us”
- Listen carefully in order to detect the key information in the complexity of answers and facts

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## THE INTERVIEWS

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Whichever radio programme they present, journalists who cover an election will certainly need to organise interviews, in particular with politicians and candidates. To improve the quality of their interviews and ensure good election coverage, journalists should follow some practical tips:

1) The **choice of questions**: A journalist should select questions prone to creating a constructive answer that will inform listeners through its content but also utilise key journalistic techniques. For instance, a journalist should not ask two questions at once, as this confuses the response. Journalists should always use questions starting with *what*, *how*, or *why*, because this kind of question requires a complete response and allows the journalist to make candidates talk about their platform and policies in a more comprehensive manner. For instance ask the politician: **What** will your party do for the youth? Or, **Why** is there no specific policy for the youth?

A journalist should also ask brief and targeted questions, one question at the time, to ensure an answer to the question while developing ways of obtaining more detailed information. If necessary, the journalist can use sentences such as “This is very interesting, tell me more.” Or “Could you be more specific?”

2) The **choice of words**: During an interview, as in any programme where a journalist participates in or facilitates dialogue, the words a journalist chooses to use are crucial to encouraging peaceful discourse, preventing an outbreak of conflict, and disseminating impartial information. The words journalists use sometimes determine the way questions are perceived. They can inform, or contribute to disinformation, rumours, or stigmatisation. Journalists who wish to cover elections responsibly will thus need to be cautious about using vague or adversarial words such as “massacre” or “assassination”, which encourage conflict rather than discourse. The journalist will also have to be particularly careful not to use such labels as “extremist”, “terrorist”, “fanatic”, or “fundamentalist” which demonise groups.

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## INTERACTIVE PROGRAMMES

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When journalists cover an election, it is important to give voice to the citizens, allowing citizens to relay their opinions and concerns and ensuring that they are heard by the various candidates. Interactive programmes like *phone-ins* allow the public to participate directly in discussions by calling in. Listeners are able to pose precise and technical questions to experts, or political questions to the candidates invited to speak on the programmes. Through this type of programme, journalists can fulfil their civic role by relaying the population’s voice. Interactive programmes offer a series of advantages and should be considered by all journalists covering elections. Interactive programmes should:

- Guarantee anonymity to people who call;
- Democratise the debate and the electoral campaign by allowing citizens to get involved;
- Offer a large variation of perspectives thanks to the listeners ;
- Give voice to “ordinary” citizens;
- Favour enhanced interaction: journalists, experts, candidates, and citizens can exchange their perspectives;
- Allow the public to be in touch with experts and the authorities;
- Provide an immediate reaction or response; and
- Allow public opinion to influence the position of candidates and make them understand the population’s concerns.

As for roundtables and interviews, interactive programmes have to **be carefully prepared** by the journalist to avoid comments favouring divisions, rumours, libel, or disinformation. Each programme has to have a **predetermined theme** and listeners should have the opportunity to ask questions on that theme. Once the radio programme is on the air, the journalist should ensure that **the people who call in are screened**. For instance, a member of the production team should receive the phone calls and briefly find information on the callers or ask them what question they have. They should reject any ill-intentioned or incoherent callers. Further, as in a round table, journalists may be required to **interrupt the caller if he or she drifts away from the topic** or monopolises the conversation. Finally, if the question asked contains adversarial terms, the journalist can **rephrase the question with respectful language and without judgement** to keep the debate from becoming conflictual.

However, because the screening and the management of listeners' comments is difficult, the use of an interactive programme should be pursued with caution. It may be preferable to avoid particularly sensitive topics and focus on technical topics such as "how to register to vote" or "how to vote" which will allow voters to ask specific questions to experts and find information on the voting process.

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## OTHER FORMATS TO CONSIDER

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Depending on the context, journalists may consider using other formats to cover elections. Short **Sketches** or **Public Service Announcements** (no longer than a few minutes at the most) can aptly deliver messages regarding the elections, each of them offering a specific message. The broadcasting of these messages on the larger scale (several times a day or on several radio stations) allows for a greater impact on the population.

**News bulletins** can also allow journalists during elections to speak about major events linked to the electoral campaign and to the electoral process. The principles of accuracy, verification of facts, and neutrality are particularly important in the context of this type of format, which is utilised in media Synergy to review the elections process on Election Day (see below and Annex 2).

### The Common Ground Approach

- To participate in the responsible coverage of elections, a radio programme must follow the "common ground" approach: the aim of the journalist is to give equal time to the different parties, exploring their differences but also highlighting any common or complementary perspectives offered. Emphasis is put on finding long term solutions for the country. This approach can reduce tensions during the campaign and promote reconciliation between the parties opposing an election's outcome.

**Illustration:** As part of the campaign that preceded the 2010 presidential elections in Guinea, journalists noted that underneath the differences between the two major parties (Union of Democratic Forces of Guinea and Gathering of the People of Guinea), they share some common ground. Both parties' speeches expressed the need to govern the country without excluding any regions, the promotion of peaceful demonstrations, and the importance of utilising all the skills of the country's population in governance.

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## MEDIA SYNERGY

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The objective of media synergy is simple: Journalists from different media organisations of a country network collaborate with each other at different stages in the electoral process to ensure responsible and effective coverage of the elections. Consequently, journalists working for different media companies throughout a country can pool their resources, share information, and cover a larger



territory and more events, thus better informing citizens and limiting the spread of rumours and misinformation, or partial, unprofessional information. Once collected by the journalists from various media companies involved in the synergy, the information is centralised, edited, and assembled (newsletter, reportage style multiplex, etc.) to later be simultaneously disseminated on air or on paper. In this synergy, emphasis is placed on ethical principles such as neutrality, independence, accuracy of facts, and pluralism (see above, section I) to promote the dissemination of professional and responsible information through the synergy and therefore the transparency of the electoral process.

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### NECESSARY MEANS TO SET UP A RADIO STATION SYNERGY DURING AN ELECTION

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- A **coordinating committee** that will ensure the collaboration of all stakeholders of the synergy will be able to specify the details of the synergy and to identify any technical or legal difficulties of the operation and finally to manage expertise requests and external assistance. This committee will also be responsible for ensuring compliance with the Code of Conduct of all Synergy members;
- A **network of correspondents** working out in the field from different media organisations scattered across the country and equipped with a mobile phone;
- A **provincial / regional desk** manned by an experienced journalist designated to report on each province to collect information from correspondents in the province and to deliver the information to the writing centre, facilitating communication;
- A **writing centre**, consisting of a team divided into sections according to their languages if necessary. The writing centre collects the information from the field, processes that information for use in the programmes, and writes the scripts of the programmes. The writing centre must be representative in terms of gender and origin to ensure diversity at all levels. It will organise several assessments, adapting and redirecting its programmes every time there is a new edition to prepare. It organises the election night with the correspondents in the field. The writing centre can also facilitate contact between hosts and correspondents, so that hosts can also relay more detailed information from correspondents that has not been reported during major news bulletins.

#### Impact of Synergy: the Mpanda incident, Burundi (2005)

In 2005, gunmen opened fire on voters in Mpanda in the province of Bubanza to disrupt the elections that were held in the country. The journalist from the Synergy office on site covered the incident live. Subsequently, rumours grew stating that "the war had resumed," that other polling stations were attacked, and that the election would be cancelled.

Responding quickly to these rumours, the Synergy interviewed members of the local administration, the police, and the Electoral Commission, who explained that the incident in Mpanda was isolated, that the elections were continuing, and that a new election would be held in areas affected by violence. To reassure voters, the Synergy broadcast offered regular updates on the security situation around polling stations across the country, defusing rumours and countering disinformation [see comment 9].

The Synergy reduced tension and supported a smooth unfolding of the elections, thereby strengthening the democratic process through responsible election.

- A **synergy headquarters** that is technically operational to ensure the editorial **coordination** with computers and an internet connection (Maison de la Presse, Common Room, etc.);
- The **commitment of partner radio stations** to only broadcast political information from the synergy reports the day before and on the Election Day. Programmes relating to elections should be distributed in **total sync** on different stations from a specific transmitter or a control station designated in advance;
- The **involvement of the Electoral Commission** is critical for synergy, as the Electoral Commission regulates the electoral process. It should be ready to intervene on the radio if necessary. In general, the Electoral Commission also benefits from the synergy because it can provide a lot of information from the field and allows it to communicate with the synergy partners quickly. This collaboration between media and the Electoral Commission as part of the synergy creates a great communication dynamic and reduces misunderstandings and suspicions.
- Where possible, **joint training sessions** for journalists from the information pool should be held at least one month before the scheduled election to increase the professionalism of journalists, raise awareness on the principles of responsible coverage of elections, and to develop contacts among the journalists covering the election-day.

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### EXAMPLE OPERATIONS/PLAN

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- **7 am:** Deploy reporters to the different polling stations. Journalists should focus on the overall atmosphere and question those responsible for setting up the polling stations on the preparation of necessary equipment for the proper unfolding of the election such as the ballots, ballot boxes, voting booths, indelible ink, etc.
- **Morning:** Reporters collect live testimonies of candidates at the exit polls. Their questions should be about encouraging increased participation in the election. A typical question could be "After performing your civic duty, what do you have to say to citizens to encourage them to get out to vote?" The goal is to obtain encouraging and responsible statements that will be broadcast repeatedly in the following hours.
- **Mid-day:** A special team of reporters goes to the Ministry of Interior and collects the Minister's statement on the data already available (estimated participation rate, recorded incidents, and / or measures taken to prevent or remedy such incidents, etc.).
- **Throughout the day:** Reporters traveling by motorcycle or car from polling station to polling station write brief reports, which can be included in the news flashes and news broadcasts by radio stations. Others offer short audio reports on the regular or chaotic election process in different places. Some reporters also visit the headquarters and other places where the activists of political parties whose candidates are running gather.
- **5 pm:** Unable to cover all polling stations, the journalists focus on a few key voting centres.
- **Closing time polling:** This moment is often the most sensitive and most likely to cause problems. To reduce the risk, **journalists must enter the polling stations and monitor the count.** The reporters can then check the numbers and compare them with those announced by members of the polling stations. They must wait for the official notice to communicate the provisional figures on the air.
- **Throughout the day:** Personal comments should be avoided by journalists. Reports should be based entirely on fact: giving the official figures, specifying these figures and reminding listeners that the figures are provisional and that only the legally authorised institutions have the right to announce the official figures.

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## CONTENT OF THE PROGRAMMES

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- Reports on election preparations should be produced in advance by various editors;
- "Multiplex" should be composed of several short reports collected from participating synergy journalists deployed across the country, and compiled at the writing centres;
- "Neutral" Interviews should be conducted, communicating mainly the voices of those involved in the voting procedure (tellers, office chairs, etc.), observers (civilians or security forces), voters, or important people at the exit of polling stations;
- There should be correspondence with several foreign capitals to include different perspectives;
- Messages or excerpts of interviews of candidates should be recorded in advance calling for the respect of democratic rules, to be used if necessary (especially in cases of violence);
- Preliminary results should be released once obtained, read by journalists from the synergy pool, in the voting centres and key polling stations chosen in advance, with no added comments; and
- Short live input from some institutions like the Electoral Commission or political parties should be included.

**Example of a grid for the 6-8 am time slot on the eve of presidential elections in Guinea broadcast by radio stations of synergy:**

6:00: Bulletin of 6 minutes + Press Review Online  
6:30: Bulletin of 6 minutes (including multiplex \* 5 cities)  
7:00: Journal of 12 minutes (including multiplex \* 10 cities)  
7:30: Journal of 6 minutes (including multiplex \* 5 cities)  
8:00: Journal of 12 minutes (including multiplex \* 10 cities)

The multiplex consists of "papers" under 30 seconds, each from reporters deployed in different cities.

## CONCLUSION



Journalists, especially in countries in a post-conflict context, have the opportunity to influence the unfolding of an election. To exert this influence in a positive way and to contribute to the consolidation of democracy in their country, journalists must do their job with great professionalism, as elections are often synonymous with increased societal stress.

If a programme or a report cannot by itself eliminate the tensions or violence that sometimes arises during the electoral processes in post-conflict zones, in the long-term the production of responsible programmes, providing credible and quality information, giving voice to the population, and focusing on finding solutions and common ground, can facilitate a change of atmosphere around an election. Programmes produced in line with the principles and advice included in this guide will be able to change the long-term behaviour of voters or of opponents in an election. These programmes will encourage people to go to the polls, encourage increased citizen participation in the democratic processes of their country, and encourage various political opponents to recognise what brings them together instead of focusing on what brings them apart.

This guide is therefore designed as a resource for journalists who will cover elections in the near future. Through this training guide, journalists can increase their knowledge of the principles that should guide their work and the role they must play during elections, while developing their skills in the production of responsible and effective programmes to cover elections. Following the advice and steps outlined in this guide, journalists can take the opportunity to be real actors in the service of democracy for their countries and not merely political instruments.

## ANNEX 1: MEDIA CODE OF CONDUCT FOR ELECTION REPORTING IN ZANZIBAR 2010

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### **Preamble**

We, media practitioners and other stakeholders in Zanzibar;  
Recognizing the significance of the forthcoming General Election;  
Guided by the desire to ensure the success of this democratic process, and  
Determined to ensure that voters make an informed choice, hereby agree on and adopt this Media Code of Conduct for covering the Fourth General Elections in Zanzibar as follows:

### **Article (1) Objectivity**

Journalists should provide fair, balanced and impartial reporting by giving equitable space and airtime to all sides of an issue.

Journalists should provide seek to the right to privacy and to give any aggrieved party the right to reply. Notwithstanding the foregoing, all journalists who are contesting political positions must adhere to the journalism practice.

### **Article (2) Truth**

Journalists covering elections must seek to the truth

### **Article (3) Correction**

Journalists should do the utmost to correct any published or aired information that is found to be inaccurate.

### **Article (4) Response to the needs of voters**

Journalists must make effort to provide voters with relevant information and education in a form easily understood at all levels with the aim of helping them make informed choices.

### **Article (5) Encourage Free Speech**

The media should support voters to express their opinion and views fairly without distortion.

### **Article (6) Confidentiality of Sources**

Journalists should observe professional ethics on revealing protection of the source of information secrecy regarding the source of confidential information.

### **Article (7) Hate Speech and Incitement**

Journalists should refrain from reporting hate speech and incitement and if necessary report reasonably.

### **Article (8) Promote Democratic Values**

The media should promote democratic values by fostering public debates and dialogue which champions the rule of law, accountability and good governance.

**Article (9) Promote Culture of Tolerance**

In the given situation of reconciliation and the formation of the Government of National Unity in Zanzibar, journalists have the obligation of reporting in educating the people of that importance; and direct them towards tolerance among each other to safeguard the existing peace and tranquillity.

**Article (10) Commitment by Media Owners**

Media owners should commit themselves to contribute toward the achievement of free and fair elections by developing the capacity of their respective media institutions and refraining from interfering in editorial independence.

**Article (11) State Media Obligation**

1. Public or State Media have a greater and a more formal obligation to provide factual and accurate information to the public and give equitable space and airtime to all political parties, candidates and platforms.
2. State Media should not use its powers as state agents to intimidate and censor journalists, rather promote understanding, and assume the role of mediator and showcase of responsible journalism.

**Article (12) Private Media Obligation**

Private media have an obligation to report elections in an impartial and balanced coverage of elections and to give equitable access to all candidates and political parties.

**Article (13) Religious Media Obligation**

Faith-based media houses should be clear of religious fanatics and ensure fair and balanced coverage of the elections by giving aspirants and political parties equitable opportunities irrespective of their beliefs or non-beliefs.

**Article (14) Investigate issues**

Media have the responsibility to investigate and expose issues and practices pertaining to elections in order to facilitate fair play and level the socio-political playing ground.

**Article (15) Advertorials**

Media houses should identify and charge equitable rates for advertorials from all political parties. The media should, however, desist from publishing advertorials that seek to create hatred and endanger national peace and security.

**Article 16) Media and the Election Acts**

Media, like all other stakeholders in the election process, must strictly adhere to the Election Acts.

**Article (17) Media obligation to Electoral Authorities**

Media houses should publish accurate election information and cover the election process in an objective and fair manner.

**Article (18) Alternative Stakeholders Views and multiple sources**

Journalists should seek and publish alternative views from all stakeholders in the election process.



**Article (19) Media and Civil Society**

The media should collaborate with civil society in providing civic and voter education, monitoring as well as advocacy for unity, tolerance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

**Article (20) Professional offences**

Journalist shall regard the following as professional misconduct:

- Plagiarism
- Malicious misrepresentation
- Calumny, slander, libel or unfounded accusations
- Acceptance of a bribe in any form in consideration of either publication or suppression.

**Article (21) Opinion Polls**

Media houses should take care in reporting the findings of opinion polls. Any report should wherever possible include the following information:

- a. Who commissioned and carried out the poll and when
- b. How many people were interviewed
- c. Where and how they were interviewed
- d. The margin of error

In case of a media itself conducting such polls, it should adhere to professional rules and methods governing the exercise.

**Article (22) Media and Marginalised Groups**

- i. Journalists should refrain from coverage that is biased and that which reinforces prejudices against women and marginalized groups and people with disability
- ii. Journalists should encourage women contestants by raising public awareness of the importance of women's participation in public life and by rebuking all moves aimed at suppressing them.
- iii. By the same token, media should encourage and promote the candidature of other marginalized groups such as the disabled, irrespective of their affiliated parties.

**APPEAL TO STATE ACTORS AND POLITICAL PARTIES AND RELATED INSTITUTIONS  
FOR THE FORTHCOMING GENERAL ELECTION**

For the media to be able to play their role effectively in ensuring free and fair election, State actors, public, political parties and other institutions should undertake to respect the rights of journalists in election reporting and also ensure their physical safety by:

**Article (1) Journalists Safety**

Refraining from harassing journalists verbally and/or physically, or inciting crowds, groups or individuals to do so;

**Article (2) Access to Sources**

Facilitating access to news sources;

**Article (3) Free Movement**

Allowing journalists to operate freely in any part of the country without fear of intimidation; except in the restricted areas.

**Article (4) Gifts**

Not manipulating journalists covering elections by offering gifts, favours or special treatment;

**Article (5) Complaints Channel**

Using existing mechanisms such as the Media Council of Tanzania Zanzibar Broadcasting Commission and Zanzibar Election Commission to channel complaints about items broadcast or published;

**Article (6) Timely Information**

Facilitating media's coverage of party conferences and campaign events by informing them sufficiently in advance of dates, times and venues without discrimination

**Article (7) Electoral Authorities**

The electoral authorities, political parties and other organization should provide the media with relevant, accurate and timely information about the election process.

## ANNEX 2: THE "FM GUINEA 2010" PROGRAMME OUTLINE

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The "Guinea FM 2010" programme was offered to FM radio station on the occasion of the presidential election of June 2010 and produced by the Synergy of Radios.

- Saturday 26 June:

*This Saturday, June 26, "FM Guinea 2010" offers a special programme from 18:30 to 20:30.*

**6:30 p.m. / 6:42 p.m.:** Special edition for the elections presented in two parts.

**6:42 p.m. / 6:45 p.m.:** Soundtrack.

**6:45 p.m. / 6:55 p.m.:** Multiplex (No. 1) with the special correspondents of FM radio stations in the region and in Conakry.

**6:55 / 7:00 pm:** Review of the national press.

**7 / 7:12 p.m.:** Multiplex (No. 2) with the special correspondents of the stations in the region and in Conakry.

**7:12 p.m. / 7:15 p.m.:** Soundtrack.

**7:15 p.m. / 7:21 p.m.:** Matches various foreign capitals. How is it that election expected in Dakar, Bamako, Paris and Washington?

**7:22 p.m. / 7:30 p.m.:** Multiplex (No. 3) with special correspondents of FM stations in the region and in Conakry.

**7:30 p.m. / 7:35 p.m.:** Summary of events in national languages.

**7:36 p.m. / 7:40 p.m.:** Soundtrack.

**7:40 p.m. / 20h:** Many artists and prominent people from the arts and culture tell how they plan to organise their Sunday and welcome in their own way the initiative taken by all radio stations for this historic weekend.

**20h / 8:06 p.m.:** Newsletter.

**20h06/20h15:** Multiplex (No. 4) with the special correspondent of FM stations in the regions and in Conakry.

**20h15/20h30:** Other artists and prominent people in culture, arts and sports are telling them how they organised their Sunday and welcome the initiative taken by all the radio stations.

- Sunday, June 27, 2010

*The "FM Guinea 2010" programme continues on Sunday from 6:00 to midnight without interruption.*

**6am-9am:** The music is light and mostly Guinean (60%), the hosting is essentially "journalistic" with practical information on issues electors raise before voters go to the polls.

**6am:** Bulletin (6 min).

**6h30/6h45:** Multiplex (1) with special correspondents in the regions and in the capital.

**7am:** Bulletin (6mn).

**7:09:** Announcement of the game "Mécéquissa?" (In English *Who's That?*)

**7:15:** Paper of humour.

**7:30:** Multiplex (2) with special correspondents in the region and in Conakry.

**7:45:** Press Review Online.

**8 am / 8:12:** Journal presented in two parts.

**8:15:** The Guinean presidential election seen by the French and European press with RFI.

**8:25:** Announcement of the game "Mécéquissa?"

**8:30 / 8:45:** Multiplex (3) with special correspondents in the region and in Conakry.

**8:45:** Summary of events in national languages.

**9h-12h:** The music is playing. It is truly Guinean (60%) but with an additional foreign twist but remaining African (Ivory, Zaire, Congo).

**9am:** Bulletin (6 min) followed by a multiplex (3) with special envoys in the region and in Conakry.

**9:20:** Animation Game "Mécéquissa?"

**9:50:** New Guinean prominent people present their programme of activities for the coming hours and welcome the initiative of private radio stations.

**10am:** Journal presented in two parts followed by a multiplex (4) with special correspondents in the regions and in Conakry.

**10:50:** Sequence "Musical."

**11h:** Bulletin followed by a new Multiplex (5) and a Summary of events in national languages.

12h-14h: Time for retro music. Great musical values of the country are put into their historical context by the host with a few stories over different periods of contemporary Guinea.

**12:** Journal presented in two parts

**12:30:** Flash + reports on the elections in progress.

**12:50:** Announcement of the game "Mécéquissa?"

**1 pm:** Flash + Summary of events in national languages.

**1:30pm:** Flash + report (s) of the voting underway.

2-4pm: Music and love songs around the theme of "the first time" told and commented on by the host with the help of poets (citations, readings by actors).

**2pm:** Information news in two parts.

**2:20 p.m.:** Animation Game "Mécéquissa"

**From 2:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. exactly, stations can "detach" from the unique programme and propose their own programme clearly identified as such.**

**3pm:** Flash + report on the elections.

**4-6:30pm:** A 100% youth time slot around hip hop music and urban culture. A quiz on Football and the 2010 World Cup can make you win a mobile phone every half hour.

**4pm:** Flash.

**5pm:** Flash + report.

**5:30pm:** Meeting with a rap group.

**6pm:** Journal in two parts + Regional Multiplex (1) + Conakry.

Evening:

**6:30pm:** News Flash + Regional Multiplex (2) + Conakry.

**7pm:** Bulletin + Multiplex (1) + Summary of events in national languages.

Election night starts around **8pm** of with live input or delayed broadcast from the Centre of Communication of the Elections (Newsagent), headquarters of INEC, the MATEP and the headquarters of the major parties.

**Local provisional results** from several dozens of polling stations are provided one by one by the host or sometimes directly by special correspondents who attended the count and the display of these partial results in the 33 prefectures and cities and the five municipalities Conakry.

**10pm:** Summary + Bulletin of the day on the votes in national language

**Around 10pm:** Live debate with several Guinean or foreign university students in the studio or on the phone.

**After 11:30pm,** all the hosts gather on the air for a happy and festive ending of the programme.



### **Search for Common Ground**

Founded in 1982, Search for Common Ground (SFCG) is an international NGO that seeks to transform the way in which the world handles conflict. SFCG's unique approach of conflict transformation links media work to work directly done with communities and in particular the strengthening of local capacities, network and social dialogue. The organisation's mission is helping people, institutions and nations to: understand differences and act upon commonalities.

### **Radio for Peacebuilding Africa**

Radio for Peacebuilding Africa is a project of SFCG based in twenty African countries that aims to improve the knowledge and abilities of radio professionals in Africa and of young journalists in particular, and to develop and disseminate impartial and balanced information. Our work consists in improving communication between political representatives, civil society and radio professionals in Africa. For more information, go to our Website: <http://www.radiopeaceafrica.org>.

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