

ETHICAL AND PROFESSIONAL PRINCIPLES OF MRT FOR MEDIA COVERAGE OF ELECTION PROCESSES

INTRODUCTION

The dedication of MRT in ensuring impartial and fair coverage, as well as in adhering to ethical and professional standards, is under scrutiny by the public, particularly during elections

The purpose of these guidelines: *Ethical and Professional Principles of MRT for Media Coverage of Election processes* - is to provide framework in which the journalists will be able to work freely and openly, and also to provide to the public with impartial and independent information about the election process, through fair reporting and analytical review of the parties' programs and campaigns.

The principles are in accordance with the international standards, as well as with:

- The standards and principles that should be adhered to by the Public Broadcasting Service (MRT) and the journalists, editors and other MRT staff when producing and providing radio and TV programs, as stipulated in the Law on Audio and Audio-Visual Media Services;
- The obligations of the MRT to ensure fair, balanced and impartial coverage of the elections in the overall program, established in the Electoral Code;
- Code of the Journalists of the Republic of Macedonia; and
- ethical standards and rules of Ethics of the Macedonian Radio Television.

The MRT shall apply these ethical and professional principles from the day of announcement of the elections, till the end of the elections.

The principles are publicly available, published on visible place on MRT' website and the MRT will be responsible for their implementation.

I. PRINCIPLES FOR COVERING ELECTIONS CAMPAIGNS

1. Impartiality and Balance

The public service broadcaster has a duty to be **balanced and impartial** in their election reporting and not to discriminate against any political party, coalition or candidate.

Only by reflecting the diversity of opinion fairly and accurately, across all the relevant issues, will MRTV be committed to offering a true picture of what is really happening. The way it will do this includes the following:

- reflect a wide range of opinions
- explore conflicting views
- ensure that no relevant perspective is ignored (ethnicity, gender, political affiliation, class, age, social background, persons with special needs, persons with cognitive disability, etc.)
- avoid any personal preferences over subject matter or choice of interviewees
- be honest and open about any personal interests/history

Being **balanced** requires that news, interviews and information programmes must not be biased in favor of, or against, any party, coalition or candidate. The balance should be reached in qualitative and quantitative aspects. A journalist must report on party programmes and on debates between the parties or candidates, so that citizens may compare them. All professionals are committed to search for facts and report them objectively. A journalist may raise questions, present different points of view and add basic information and context, but must always ensure balance and neutrality.

Furthermore, each bulletin, programme, as well as web-pages, must ensure relevant coverage of all participants in the election process, including relevant coverage of the small parties and independent candidates. In the period from the announcement of the elections to the day when the campaign starts, MRTV will ensure proportional and respective coverage of the political subjects in the election process, normally across a week. During the election campaigns the Rules on Media Coverage of Election Process, which were adopted by MRT as an obligation from the Electoral Code shall apply.

Impartiality is often more than a simple matter of 'balance' between opposing viewpoints. Being impartial means not being prejudiced towards or against any particular side. This principle implies inclusiveness in reporting, considering the broad perspective and ensuring that a range of views is appropriately reflected. All journalists have their own views, and yet, to deliver comprehensive and authoritative coverage of news and current affairs, they must rise above their own personal perspectives.

The duty to inform the electorate and to report with balance and impartiality applies to all programs, and is particularly strong concerning news programmes. In news programmes, MRTV will provide a news coverage that encompasses the delivery of facts that have been checked and confirmed.

Where there are other major news stories not directly related to the elections, special care is needed to ensure that any political subject is covered respectively, but also reflects the fact that the country is in an election period. How this is achieved will depend on the particular circumstances of each case. For example, where there are major stories which fall outside inter-party rivalry, due impartiality may be achieved by allowing more time to those politicians most closely involved, reporting fully statements giving the audience factual information and, on occasion, reflecting vigorous internal debates within parties.

In exceptional circumstances, comments from politicians can stand alone, without any other political contribution (interviews about a personal tragedy, a public disaster, or where the politician concerned is an eye witness to a news incident). Any proposal to use a comment in this way must be referred to a senior editorial figure.

Reporting in a balanced and impartial way involves the following:

- A journalist must not allow his or her own opinions to surface directly or indirectly in coverage, speech or in behavior.
- It is important to report honestly. Quotes from candidates and party leaders must be reported without alteration and in context. If a journalist is not certain what was meant, he or she must get back in touch with the person for clarification.
- When a translation is necessary (if a candidate has spoken in a language of non-majority community), extreme care is called for to avoid distorting the meaning of what was said. It is an editorial decision as to whether a voiceover or subtitles will be used.
- A news story must never be used to support a candidate or party.
- The tone of news stories must be neutral. They should report on differences between the parties but without judging them in any way.
- A news story should never be used to present a personal point of view. Withholding personal views of an article's subject matter is a professional obligation. A journalist's views of a matter must never become part of the story, nor even be mentioned.
- Never wear or carry clothing, badges, stickers or any other item bearing the initials or slogans of a party or candidate.
- Abstain from expressing any kind of opinion of a party or candidate during a rally, during field reporting, or an interview.
- During the news programme attention is to be paid in which order the information on the political entities will be reported. The news blocs on the ruling and opposition parties should rotate.

2. Fairness in the Presentation of Candidates

All parties and candidates competing in an election must enjoy **fair access to media**. This is a fundamental principle of free, fair and transparent elections. The intention of these guidelines is to encourage vigorous debate and to give more space and visibility to candidates in general, without giving unfair advantage to one candidate or party over another.

Fairness will be achieved in following ways:

- If any candidate takes part in an item/programme about a specific electoral area, then these other candidates should also be offered the opportunity to take part, or be given a similar opportunity across a series of reports. Candidates or parties who have not demonstrated that they have substantial electoral support in that area must still be offered proportionate coverage.
- MRT Programmes may decide to invite either candidates or party representatives to be guests in various programs (news, debates, interviews, political information programs). However, if a candidate from one of the parties is invited to take part, the other participants

should, where at all possible, also be candidates. In exceptional circumstances, if a candidate is genuinely unavailable, the opportunity may be offered instead to a suitable party representative from within the electoral area (e.g. party official or agent) but it should normally be made clear to the audience that the missing candidate was invited and why they were unable to take part. If a party declines to put forward a representative or nominates someone in a way which risks unfairness to other candidates, the item/programme may go ahead without them. The MRTV will make efforts to stimulate the parties to delegate new persons, in order to hear different views and better reflect the electoral body diversity. On the other hand, this is required in order to prevent domination of some party persons in the programs (such as, for example, political party spokespersons);

- In addition to the journalists and editors, all other persons involved in the production of the program (cameramen, directors, persons in charge of the lighting, tone, etc.) are obliged to pay attention not to give an unfair advantage to some candidate over others.
- During news, interviews, debates and other programs, the host/ anchor must behave in accordance with the ethical and professional principles of impartiality and neutrality towards all participants (guests) in the program. He/ she must not show partiality towards particular political option/ guest in any manner (type of questions asked, gestures, tone, body language, behavior towards the guests) and he/ she must provide opportunity to all guests to express their standpoints and attitudes.
- Where candidates have other roles – political or non-political - care should be taken to ensure that they do not gain an unfair advantage in the election campaign over other candidates.

3. Accuracy and verification of the information

A fundamental principle of journalism is that all information in a news article must be completely accurate. A journalist must search for truth and recount it as completely as possible while exercising a critical sense that demands systematic confirmation of all facts in the article.

The editors and journalists must have in mind that the trust is hard won and easily lost.

*To be considered **reliable**, information must meet the following conditions::*

- The information must be determined to be true, not false. Manipulation, disinformation and spreading of rumors are common practices in electoral periods. Never assume that information is true. It must be confirmed by at least two/ more sources.
- If doubt exists, the most prudent course is to withhold the information. In order to avoid speculation and wrong information, MRT shall not disclose information concerning events for which no official confirmation has been received by the relevant entities.
- The journalist should not rely on grammatical constructions to imply doubt concerning activities of a particular political entity, or candidate, or ridicule them.
- Every element of a news article must be accurate: the events, the dates, the places, the quotes, etc. One error in one basic fact can cast doubt on the accuracy of an entire article.
- When a journalist realizes, or is informed, that he has used inaccurate information, he must

correct it rapidly and with the same prominence given to the original article.

- Journalists should cite sources as often as possible. An election article built entirely on anonymous sources will be considered suspect and unreliable. This method should be avoided in all cases.

Journalists should always ask a source why he demands anonymity, especially when he is passing information that is sensitive or likely to harm the reputation of an individual, a candidate or a party. The source's reasons for anonymity should be carefully assessed. If they seem legitimate (fears for his safety, for instance), the information should be considered for use. But first the journalist must get confirmation from independent sources. MRT must never rely on anonymous source to report rumors or unfounded accusations.

The MRT journalists must pay attention to the choice of experts invited onto programs. The audience might be misled by the journalists' choice of the so called "independent experts". The journalist should be especially careful with the "experts" close to particular political option, and the journalists should consult other sources that have alternative or opposing opinions.

In general, it is advisable to avoid the word "expert" in the reporting, and use their actual title (such as: professor, blogger, journalists, writer, historian, etc...) i.e. explain why he/ she has the credibility to talk on a particular topic.

4. Keeping Information Precise and in Context

The MRT coverage of the elections shall be accurate, precise and all the information put in a proper and relevant context.

To achieve this objective it is necessary that the journalist observe the following rules:

- The basic requirement for all stories is to answer the questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why?
- The journalist must be precise. In coverage of a rally, he must describe the place, the issues addressed in the speech and the crowd's responses. Especially for the radio program, the reporting should be stripped down to facts – inform briefly, clearly, simple and understandable.
- Manipulation of the information by use of the camera, audio, video or photos is not allowed.
- The journalists should pay attention when reporting numbers stated by participants in the election campaign. The numbers pertaining to money, projects, kilometers, etc. (roads, water supply, sewage systems, etc.) should be carefully verified after stated by the politicians. In a case of live statement of live broadcast from a rally, they certainly need to be conveyed but if the journalist identifies some inconsistency she/ he would have to verify the number and inform the public if it is not true.

- The journalists should avoid making estimations of the number of people attending the rally, meeting etc. This is why it is recommendable when reporting for TV, several wide shots to be provided in order to allow the audience to be able to draw its own conclusions about the attendance of the certain assembly. When reporting for radio, it is sufficient for the journalist to mention the place/ location of the rally, so the audience can have impression on how big the attendance is (square, sports hall, cultural home, school yard, etc.)
- Imprecision can distort facts. The journalists, editors and technical staff should pay attention when making choices and, when editing the statements of the interlocutors, the main thought i.e. the essence of the interlocutor's message should be retained and reported in full. For example: in a survey the people were asked do they like a particular candidate for President of the state, and one of the responses was "He's good but he's old". The journalist edited the second part of the statement and aired only the "He's good" part. Due to intervention by the journalist, the voters were misled.
- Mistakes are always possible. Because of that, the journalist covering a story should always be careful in his or her assessments and avoid definitive judgments. If the journalist and the editor notice mistakes, they need to be rectified immediately in the first upcoming news broadcast.

5. Distinguishing Between Facts and Opinions

Journalists are constantly faced with problems of reporting facts and opinions. They must be able to distinguish between them. This is important in both gathering and writing news.

A **fact** can be defined as something said to have happened or supposed to true. However, the journalist needs to know how reliable statements are before he or she can report them as facts. This determines how they are presented to the audience. There are three kinds of facts which the journalist has to deal with. There are facts which have been proved to be true; facts which are probably true though they have not been proved; and facts which could be true, although they appear to be lies.

Opinions are different from facts. An **opinion** is a conclusion reached by someone after looking at the facts. Opinions are based on what people believe to be facts. This can include probable facts and even probable lies, although few people will knowingly give an opinion based on a proven lie.

For journalists there are two main categories of opinions: verifiable opinion and expert opinion. The first category refers to conclusions which can be verified (shown to be true) or shown to be false.

Expert opinion is opinion on an issue, based on special knowledge of the facts. The best kind of expert opinion is one in which the expert keeps their own personal feelings out of their conclusions. They look at the facts as they see them, and draw a conclusion based only on those facts. However, even opinion from an "impartial expert" must be attributed, so that your readers or listeners can judge the likely truth or otherwise of what they say.

The news anchors and journalists may not express their political views and opinions in the news.

6. The dual role of the government during an election period

To be in power means to be under much greater attention of the media due to the need for the media to cover the activities of the government, which could include official events, meetings and policies being implemented. The events can be *real and relevant* (such as national celebrations or anniversaries), *real and marginal* (such as opening of public buildings) and *pseudo-events* (events created or managed by the Government in order to attract greater media coverage).

During the campaign the government representatives have a double role – government representatives, but they are also candidates of the ruling party for the upcoming elections. This dual identity is problematic in two ways:

- The right of equal access for all candidates, which should be balanced with the freedom and obligation of the media to report Government activities;
- The right to equal treatment of all candidates. The news related to the ruling party can sometimes be framed in a positive manner due to the nature of the event being covered, such as official meetings, international events, etc..

The Government members can try to hide the election campaign activities behind their institutional activities, or will try to make them their integral part, such as opening of buildings, speeches for students, opening of drug addiction programs, etc. Therefore, the journalists should make efforts to clearly separate these activities and not to give privileged treatment to Government members. This is especially relevant in the context of commitments to ensure autonomy and independence from the political and economic centers of power.

7. Hate speech and inflammatory language

In the context of the election campaign, one of the greatest professional challenges for journalists is the question of how to report inflammatory language and statements conveyed during political campaigns that incite or could incite hatred or intolerance on various grounds. The journalist's sense of social responsibility requires him or her to take the political environment fully into account. In extremely volatile sociopolitical situations, when reporting on hate speeches which could endanger individuals, communities or the entire nation, one ethical option is to refrain from reporting such comments.

On the other hand, the accurate reporting of hate speeches and actions is a valuable early warning tool, indicating the potential for serious social conflict or human rights violations within a campaign. Because of that the media has an obligation to carefully convey hate speeches and inflammatory comments and such activities of parties and candidates, but condemning them at the same time, calling into question their credibility.

In particular circumstances, the accurate reporting of inflammatory speeches or hate speeches can be used to undermine the intention of the sources, in this case of the parties or candidates. The journalists should document the consequences of such words and activities. For example, if members of an audience leave a political rally and inflict violence on opponents or supporters, this is vital context that must be reported.

If, during a live broadcast some guest uses hate speech, the host will immediately interrupt him, will distance him/herself from such speech and will warn the guest that he or she will not be given the

chance to speak if he/she continues to use such language. The journalist will also interrupt and distance him or herself from the interlocutor who uses hate speech or inflammatory language in a live contact program.

8. Reporting on public surveys

Reporting public survey results during an election period is important because they are part of the story of the election process, and the public has the right to be informed about them. In this regard, it is important for the journalist to pay attention to the context of reporting of survey results, the accuracy of the information, and use the relevant language. The journalist should also have in mind that the results can be incorrect, so there is a real danger that the public could be misled if the reporting is only about public surveys that show or suggest dramatic tendencies or shifts. Therefore, MRT shall report about public survey results only if the entity who ordered such survey is known and if such survey has been carried out using representative samples.

When reporting about public survey results, the MRT will comply with the following principles:

- Will compulsorily disclose the following information: name of the party that ordered the survey and paid for it, name of the institution that implemented the survey, the methodology used, the size and structure of the sample surveyed and the time period in which the survey was implemented;
- Will not organize the news around the results of a single public opinion survey;
- The ticker tape at the bottom of the screen showing the title of the news piece shall not emphasize the survey results that go in favor or against some political option;
- Will not reply solely on interpretation of the survey results provided by the entity that ordered or implemented the survey, but the journalist will try to come up with his own standpoint by analyzing the questions, results and trends;
- Will exercise special care in approaching the survey results that deny the initially established trends of the attitude among the voters, without convincing explanation for the reasons;
- Shall not use language that gives the survey greater credibility than the one it realistically deserves.

9. Electoral silence

During the electoral silence, the MRT shall continue reporting about the election process during the actual casting of the votes, and shall not broadcast content that could be deemed violation of the electoral silence, which is prescribed in the Rules on Media Coverage of Election Processes.

10. Right to correction and reply

Any participant in the election process (candidate, political party, coalition, etc.) as well as any individual or legal entity has the right to ask from the MRT i.e. from the MRT editor in charge, to publish a correction of news that has been aired featuring incorrect information that could violate that participant's right or interests, or can ask for the right to reply to aired information if there is a dispute about the facts as published/ aired, or there is legitimate interest for that to happen

Such correction must be published without any changes, amendments or editorial comments, as soon as possible.

II. PERSONAL INTEGRITY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE JOURNALISTS

1. Social responsibility of the journalists

Freedom of the press demands responsibility. A journalist is also a citizen and may, even while practicing his or her profession, play a part in defusing political crises and conflicts. A journalist should always be aware of the positive and negative effects that his/her work can have. This implies that whatever the subject matter, the words and tone should be as neutral and sober as possible. This also implies the exercise of calm judgment in taking on topics with inflammatory potential, including those that can lead to individuals or groups being stigmatized.

In light of these factors, a journalist should:

- Respect human dignity and the presumption of innocence. They must avoid casting suspicion on anyone's reputation and honor without credible information.
- Respect private lives and personal information and should avoid reporting in this domain except when essential for the understanding of an event or situation in public life.
- Refuse to feed or spread rumors, even if others in the media are doing so.
- Refrain from any discourse that incites hatred, violence, destruction, robbery, intolerance, racism, xenophobia and prejudice. Journalists who don't respect these rules risk legal sanctions.

2. Professional integrity and honesty of the journalists

A journalist should know how to keep himself or herself independent of the parties and candidates. Of course, maintaining access to them is important in getting a sense of their personalities and in understanding their political goals. Relations with politicians should be strictly professional, with no pretense of friendship.

For this reason, a journalist should never:

- Accept any money, or gift of any value, or any favor that could influence his or her judgment, create a conflict of interest, or damage his/her credibility.
- Accept a favor of any kind in exchange for the publication or non-publication of an article.

A **conflict of interest** may arise when the external activities of anyone involved in producing the content (journalists, editors, technical staff, freelancers, investigative journalists, producers...) affects the MRTV's reputation, integrity, impartiality and independence. Audiences must be able to trust the MRTV and be confident that editorial decisions are not influenced by outside interests, political or commercial pressures, or any personal interests. This goes especially for the media workers preparing the news and information programs.

The anchors and journalists in news programs must not:

- Promote or advertise any company, external organization or political party (exceptions are promotional activities or books they have previously written).
- Must not clearly say how they voted or express support for any party
- Express opinions in favor or against, or to lobby for some topic/ public policies/ political or business topic/ controversial topics, especially when they are part of a current political debate.

The observance of the duty of providing **honesty** in the media reporting also means the following:

- A journalist may not use improper means to obtain information (such as recording an interview with a candidate without permission).
- A journalist may not spend or receive money in exchange for information.
- A journalist must tell individuals unfamiliar with how the media works that what they say may be included in a news report that many people will see or hear.
- A journalist does not plagiarize, and makes sure to cite the work of colleagues when using their work. A journalist credits the photos/ videos/ text/ sound accompanying his/her work, if taken by someone else. For example, when citing interviews or texts from other media, the journalist must clearly say from which medium the extracts have been taken.

3. Personal use of the social media

Everyone producing some content in MRT (journalists, editors, technical staff, freelancers, investigative journalists, producers...) must be aware that use of any party' symbols on *Facebook* and *Twitter* is considered as broadcasting information. Therefore, the journalists, editors and everyone else involved in creation of the content related to the elections must pay attention not to undermine the impartiality of MRT or disrupt the reputation of the MRT via their activity on social media, even in a private capacity.

It is therefore not recommended to express personal opinions on political issues, on personal websites or social media. This recommendation is about texts, photos, videos, logos, badges or any material that could associate to any political party.

III. CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE AND THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE ELECTIONS

1. Material from the audience

Enabling communication and interactivity with the public through different platforms is especially relevant in building confidence in public service broadcasting. The MRT should maintain sincere and open relations with the audience and must not mislead audiences. .

Audience contributions to MRT programs may come by phone call, SMS text, social media message (*Facebook*, *Twitter* or *Youtube*) or email, or some other interactivity mechanism, including "vox

pop". The producers of the content must be careful when determining the origins of the material obtained from the public and undertake responsibility to verify the authenticity of the same.

MRT must reflect the attitudes of the audience by providing the due balance (example, if 60% comments are pro-governmental and 40% are pro-opposition or vice versa, this ratio on the social networks should be described).

MRT must not treat this information as a reliable source, but it must be open for cooperation with the audience. All the information from the audience needs to be checked and verified before publishing. In exceptional cases when relevant information which might be of public interest is provided by citizens, such as election frauds or incidents, the journalists must check and report the material with the State Election Committee and wait for verification of the information before publishing the information. The journalist may also go on the spot and try to check the information him or herself.

Journalists should not automatically assume that contributors from other organizations (such as academics, journalists, researchers and representatives of charities) are unbiased and they may need to make it clear to the audience when contributors are associated with a particular viewpoint.

The content producers will need to ensure that contributors are appropriately described and that they have taken into account the relevant information that could point to a potential partiality or lack of objectivity.

2. Material from parties or candidates

The political parties record their events (rallies etc.) and can offer the produced material to the journalists. But, this material brings the danger of possible manipulation of audience impressions, for example attendance at the event, what was said or missed from the shots, applause, focusing on the leader, or certain symbols etc.

Therefore, if the MRTV does not have a team present at a particular event due to logistical reasons, it can request a recording from another source, by clearly identifying the origin of such recording. It can also be a recording by the political party but it is necessary to clearly label its origins (especially when it comes to very important event, incident, etc...). Any contribution by the party candidates must be clearly identified/labeled.

When using such materials, neutral language should be used in the information i.e. the journalist must stipulate the source of the information (for example: it was pointed out, we were told, as we were informed, it was stated by this party, etc.).

These guiding principles for best practice were compiled by a working group comprising the following media professionals:

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Vesna Nikodinoska, Macedonian Institute for Media

Zoran Tanevski, former journalist and former spokesperson of the State Election Commission

The working group had assistance, through training and consultations, from the BBC.

This document contains relevant international and domestic professional and ethical standards stipulated in the following guidelines and publications:

- *BBC Elections Guidelines*, BBC, 2015. Available at:

http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/pdfs/2015_Election_Guidelines.pdf.

- *BBC Editorial Guidelines*, BBC. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines>.

- *Handbook for journalists during elections*, Reporters without Borders and Organisation Internationale De Francophonie. Available at:

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- *Guidelines for Election Broadcasting*, ARTICLE 19, 1994, reprinted 1997. Available at: <https://www.article19.org/data/files/pdfs/tools/electionbroadcastingtrans.pdf>

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Available at: <http://znm.org.mk/drupal-7.7/mk/node/440>.