A TOOLKIT ON HOW TO MONITOR MEDIA COVERAGE OF ELECTIONS

This toolkit was prepared by Rasto Kuzel in cooperation with the Council of Europe Office in Ukraine with the aim of helping civil society organizations to monitor media coverage during elections

The information environment has changed significantly in recent years, particularly as a result of new trends and developments, including the increased role of social media networks. This technological and social shift is changing the way media influence the whole democratic decision-making process, notably during elections. Television is still generally the most popular source of political information for voters but the internet, with online media and social media networks, has gradually increased its role. For a certain segment of society, particularly younger people, it has already overtaken television as the main source of political information.

We have unfortunately seen a number of negative trends in the past few years which have cast a shadow over the conduct of elections in a number of countries. This concerns not only countries with an authoritarian system of governance but also well-established democracies. There is a general tendency for politicians to become disconnected from voters and quickly forget about their promises once the elections are over. They are instead busy determining how to stay in power, which contributes to the overall lack of trust in politicians and institutions.

As recent experience with elections in many countries shows, growing public distrust of mainstream political parties has resulted in people voting for populist or more radical alternatives. Populists offer short-term solutions to long-term problems, which resonate with many voters and are amplified by social media networks. Thanks to the internet, we live in a society of immediate consumption – if we see something online that we like, we can order it right away. Responsible political decisions require more time and are often not very popular, which is why it is more difficult to pursue them in an online media world "virtual supermarket".

While social media networks have expanded the possibility of receiving and imparting information, they have contributed to a general lack of meaningful debate, with internet users divided among "filter bubbles" of like-minded people who are locked in echo chambers that reinforce their own biases. These trends are contributing to a decrease in critical thinking among audiences. Disinformation created for profit or other gains, disseminated through state-sponsored programs or spread through the deliberate distortion of facts by individuals or groups with a particular agenda, including the desire to impact elections, is a serious problem with negative implications for democratic institutions. Those behind such disinformation include co-ordinated actors (influence campaigns and internet trolls) who spread inauthentic content (junk news and deep fakes) aiming to undermine the reputation of candidates (especially women), to discourage or eliminate voters (particularly marginalized groups), and to cast a shadow over the integrity of the electoral process.

Other emerging threats to democratic discourse in general and electoral processes, in particular, include abusive behavior, hate amplification, trolling, identity theft and other privacy-invasive practices, foreign interference – and the inability of observers to identify them. Other challenges include the growing politicization of the media, public accusations against the media by politicians, and the fact that journalists often have to work under undue pressure.

These developments have prompted various stakeholders to conceive appropriate responses in terms of regulation and self-regulation which can help tackle these challenges. It is clear that big

technology companies are disconnected from the local context in many countries and should have greater responsibility for the content which appears on their networks. Given that Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly being used to address content-related issues, it is important that it is taken into consideration from the perspective of states' human rights obligations, with transparency becoming a standard norm integrated into the system. There is a general lack of international standards and regional commitments aimed at regulating the new media and introducing complaints processes, although some states (such as Germany or France) have brought in national legislation to regulate and sanction intolerant content and disinformation online. However, these attempts have been met with negative reactions from freedom-of-expression advocates who fear that these regulations may go too far and result in censorship.

It is therefore important that the development of international standards and regional commitments with regard to the regulation of the new media is based on solid and comprehensive research. At the same time, it is important to review the existing standards regulating the media coverage of elections and bring them into line with the current new trends. For example, does it still make sense to impose a campaign moratorium prior to election day in the internet era, particularly as it is very difficult if not impossible to properly implement it given the transborder character of the internet. The relevant stakeholders should ask these questions and should have reliable and comprehensive data at their disposal.

The monitoring of traditional and new media by civil society organizations helps to provide such data and could generally help to inform the debate on future standards and commitments in this area. With this in mind, I wrote this toolkit to share my experience of monitoring media during elections in a number of countries for the last two decades. My intention was to focus on how to deal with common issues that may be addressed by pre-election monitoring and attempted to come up with some responses in monitoring reflecting the above-mentioned challenges. Most importantly, I try to offer some basic concept on how to monitor social media networks but it should be said that by the time of writing this toolkit, this methodology is far from being well-tested and comprehensive and more time is clearly needed until there will be more answers than questions in this respect. What is clear however is that it is important not to ignore traditional media that are still the primary sources of political information in most countries. This is why the toolkit tries to offer some basic guidelines on how to monitor different types of media, ranging from TV, online, to social media networks.

Moreover, I write also about ensuring synergy between those who conduct monitoring (regulators, CSOs, observers) as well as how to use the results to advocate for improvements and changes. I would like to stress that the exact design of each media monitoring activity is dependent on the research question to be answered. In the examples I mention in the toolkit, I wanted to provide tools that would allow monitors to determine whether broadcasters' coverage of election campaigns was balanced and fair and if broadcasters exercised balance in their coverage of contentious political and other issues. I hope this toolkit could be useful particularly for civil society organizations or activists active in the field of freedom of expression and media, in the context of elections. I would like to thank the Council of Europe for supporting this activity and particularly Inna Zubar and Nadya Davidyuk whose contribution to this toolkit was important.

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Here is a pdf version of the toolkit

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Here is a [shorter-version](#) based on the toolkit