

MONITORING OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF ELECTIONS

Practical Guide

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INTRODUCTION – What is the purpose of this practical guide

The aim of this document is to provide a methodology to deal with common issues that may be addressed by pre-election monitoring. It is, however, important to note that the exact design of each media monitoring activity is dependent on the research question to be answered. In the above-mentioned examples, the intention was 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.



Initiating a media monitoring project

During elections, media monitoring provides benchmarks for judging the fairness of the election process. Media monitoring assesses the behaviour of the media during various phases of the election process and evaluates their compliance with international standards and local regulations on election coverage. It helps to establish whether the candidates are being given equitable access to media to convey their messages to voters and whether information available through the media is sufficient for voters to make well-informed choices at the ballot box. Statistical data on the amount of time dedicated to contestants and the manner in which contestants and other key political actors are covered by the media, along with analyses of bias, of the extent and quality of voter education campaigns or of the relevancy of election-related information serve as a basis for assessments. The results of the monitoring show how the media behave and keep the public and contestants aware of these issues. When shortcomings are identified, corrective action should be taken to improve media coverage or protect media rights and freedoms. In this respect, media monitoring should be part of an ongoing process, both quantitatively and qualitatively, feedback to the media sector and to foster professional and ethical standards.

Media monitoring is an effective means of holding those supposed to be critical scrutinisers to account. The main goal of media monitoring conducted by a civil society organisation

(CSO) is to provide feedback to media audiences and initiate a discussion about the quality of media reporting and the importance of real watchdog-type reporting and investigative journalism. Given the recent changes in the way media and other sources of information operate during elections, monitoring of the media by citizens so as to observe and question their compliance with existing standards is an important part of election observation and should contribute to overall media literacy and awareness. Furthermore, media monitoring reports provide the media, political contestants and citizens with benchmarks whereby they can assess the fairness of the election process as a whole. The basic question citizens should ask when conducting a media monitoring exercise is whether information available through the media is sufficient for voters.

Media monitoring

Media monitoring is an effective tool to hold those who are supposed to be the controllers to account

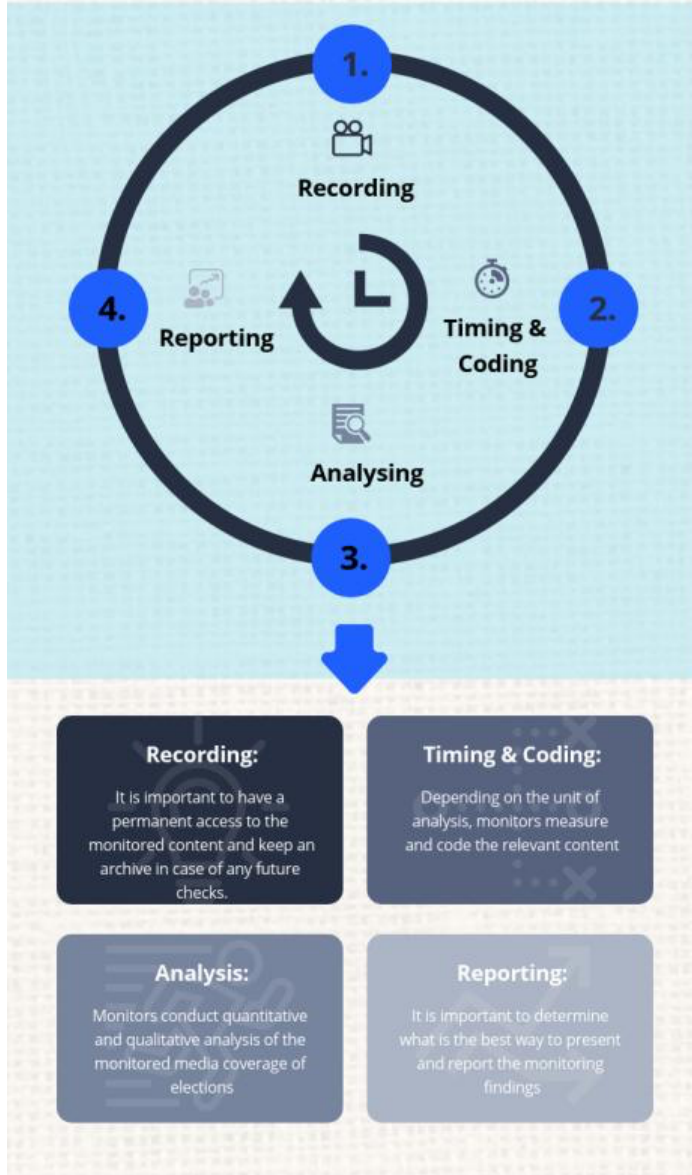


CHART 1 SHOWS VARIOUS PHASES OF THE MONITORING PROCESS

As can be seen from Chart 1, the monitoring process consists of the following four phases: recording and archiving; timing and coding; analysis; and reporting.

Recording & Archiving – it is important to have permanent access to the monitored content and to keep an archive permitting to check the data matrix to ensure the overall quality of the monitoring and eliminate any possible errors that may occur in the course of the monitoring. All the analysed media are carefully recorded and compiled into an exhaustive project archive and database, both physical with original recordings and electronic.

Timing & Coding – depending on the *unit of analysis*, monitors measure and code the relevant content. In the case of the coverage of political contestants and other relevant entities, the *unit of analysis* is the time devoted to each contestant or entity (counted in seconds, if the unit of analysis is 1 second). In addition to calculating how much time relevant entities receive in the media, it is also important to understand how the time is used. Equal time does not automatically mean equal coverage. The tone of the coverage (sentiment analysis) and how the actor or entity is portrayed is important information complementing the data on time allocation. The

sequence of time relating to the *relevant political actor* is coded according to the following variables: the total *direct/indirect time* and the *tone of the coverage* (positive, neutral, negative, see also *Media Analysis: What are We Trying to Determine*). Within a program, which is the *unit of context*, there are numerous units of analysis related to various political actors or entities. The *units of analysis* are recorded and coded separately with selected variables.



Analysis – corresponds to the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the monitored media coverage of elections. *Quantitative analysis* includes a number of numeric measures and indicators (variables) that can be counted and analysed, including assessing and producing findings regarding the time allocated to each monitored subject, topics, top stories and geographical area of coverage and also evaluating the tone of the coverage in which these subjects were portrayed – positive, neutral or negative. In addition, monitoring can focus on the structure of news programmes in terms of their thematic diversity, geographical coverage and top stories in the monitoring period, as well as the duration of news items. *Qualitative analysis* evaluates the performance of selected media outlets against ethical and professional standards, such as balance, accuracy, timeliness, choice of issues, omission of information, advantage of incumbency, positioning of items, inflammatory language that cannot be easily quantified (see also *Media Analysis: What are We Trying to Determine*). These data are reported separately and integrated into the comments and conclusions of the narrative reports.

When the level of political diversity in the election-focused reporting is assessed, it is a good practice to analyse a minimum period of two weeks before identifying any tendencies and trends and before drawing any conclusions on whether or not a particular media outlet is fair and balanced.



Reporting - it is important to make sure that people with experience of media monitoring carry out the data analysis, create tables and charts and write monitoring reports. It should be clear before each monitoring process how many reports will be published along with the precise timeline. Depending on the length of the monitoring, it is important to determine the number of interim reports to be published in the lifespan of the project. Given the fact that it is good practice to analyse a minimum of two weeks of monitoring and to leave some time for data analysis, it is recommended to leave at least three weeks between the reports (the precise timing is determined in accordance with the number of monitored outlets and the amount of data to be processed and analysed). The final report should include a comprehensive analysis with in-depth information about the trends and tendencies monitored, along with monitoring results (in the form of charts and tables) showing a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the media coverage, as well as project recommendations for legal and other improvements (see also Reporting).



DEVELOPING PROJECT GOALS

It is important to develop a clear project goal and to identify the key objectives and the reasons for conducting a media-monitoring project during elections.

CHART 2: MEDIA MONITORING PHASES



PURPOSE LOADING...



PURPOSE OF THE MONITORING

The aim of the monitoring is to provide a professional, comprehensive and objective assessment of political diversity and balance in the news and current affairs coverage of the monitored media. Additional objectives of the monitoring include focusing on social media networks and the potential impact of disinformation and propaganda, or determining to what extent the media combat stereotypes (for example, in the context of gender-related topics and issues). In general, the main goal of the monitoring is to inform the public about the conduct of the media during the elections, to initiate a discussion about the objectivity and quality of the media reporting and to promote media compliance with international standards and best practices regarding freedom of expression and independence.

In addition to the main goals stated above, here are some additional objectives.

- ✓ To provide voters with accurate information on whether the mass media enable them to have a fair and balanced picture of the campaign and alert them regarding the need to question their sources of information prior to elections.
- ✓ To raise public awareness and encourage journalists, editors and media outlet owners to observe standards of balanced reporting in the broadcast and print media focusing on specific important political issues.
- ✓ To motivate citizens so that they learn how to view and accept information. For many citizens, this could be a unique opportunity to better understand what actual role the media should play in a democratic and free society.
- ✓ To advocate for positive changes to media laws so that public media become independent and reporting is balanced.
- ✓ To document and raise public awareness about cases of administrative restrictions, intimidation or harassment of the media attributable to the state administration or a political party.



SCOPE AND TYPE OF MONITORING

The type of monitoring is determined in line with the monitoring objectives. If the main aim is to know the degree of political diversity in media reporting, as well as what kind of information is available to voters prior to elections, it is important to identify the outlets which serve as the main sources of information for people in making their political choices. The scope of the monitoring is determined in line with the available human and financial resources as well as the objectives of the monitoring project. A good approach is first to make a baseline assessment of the media situation in the country concerned and find out what other monitoring projects are planned by non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders. Other organisations which may be engaged in media monitoring during elections include media regulators, election management bodies, professional media organisations, media themselves, academia and international observers. While it is obviously good to avoid duplicating efforts by civil society organisations, it is not a problem if there are two parallel media monitoring operations by these organisations as long as the methodological basis and main objectives of each operation are clear (see also Section 5 How to engage monitoring actors and ensure synergy between stakeholders and sustainability of monitoring results).

DECIDING WHAT OUTLETS TO MONITOR

The main criteria for selecting media outlets to be monitored include media ownership (state/public or private), their potential impact (size of their audiences and their popularity) and what other sources of information are available. For example, there are countries with very restrictive media environments and very limited diversity where the only alternative sources of information to state-owned media are print or online newspapers with a very low circulation. They would probably not meet the second criterion for selection concerning the size of their audience (as their potential reach may be very low), but it is important that they be included as they take a different editorial line from the state/public media and thus provide a platform for different views. With regard to the types of programmes to be monitored, the monitoring usually focuses on all the programmes aired during prime time, i.e. the time when the audience peaks (usually from 6pm to midnight). Of course, important political programmes or special election programmes could also be recorded and analysed if aired outside what is generally perceived as prime time (for example, for radio, prime time often also includes morning programmes).



PUBLIC BROADCAST MEDIA

The **public broadcast media** have obligations to serve all the people as they are funded by taxpayers' money. They should inform the electorate about election matters, including the role of elections in a democracy, how to exercise one's right to vote, the key electoral issues, and the policy positions of the various parties and candidates contesting the election. Moreover, they are subject to strict rules of impartiality and balance, particularly when reporting on the governing party/parties and on government decisions and actions during an election period. This means that equal coverage should be given to arguments in favour of both sides in any referendum. They should also grant all parties and candidates equitable access to the media, enabling them to communicate their messages directly to the public, either free of charge or at subsidised rates. Equitable access means fair and non-discriminatory access allocated according to objective criteria for measuring overall levels of support and includes factors such as timing of access and any fees.

PRIVATE BROADCAST MEDIA

Various international instruments recommend that **private broadcast media** provide fair, balanced and impartial information during election campaigns. Terrestrial broadcasters, allocated a portion of the public frequency spectrum, are accordingly obliged to serve the public. In particular, during elections private broadcasters should also comply with a number of obligations regarding the fair and impartial coverage of elections, especially in their information programmes. Their responsibility to play fair in the elections also derives from the fact they are widely watched and are often more popular than public media outlets in transitional countries. Given the digital switchover in a number of countries, it is relevant to reconsider the scarcity argument used previously vis-à-vis the private broadcasters.

During elections, broadcast media are key instruments influencing and shaping political, social and cultural realities and they have to comply with ethical and professional standards of journalism. Nationwide broadcasters play a key role in virtually all types of elections as they serve as a primary source of information. Regional or local media could also play an important role, whether in parliamentary elections in the case of a majoritarian election system or in local elections.



PRINT AND ONLINE MEDIA

The previous Council of Europe resolutions did not envision any special regulations for the print media, non-linear audio-visual media services and online news-services regarding reporting on or the editorial coverage of elections in Council of Europe member states. As a matter of tradition, and because of the different natures of various forms of media, the press has generally been free to have a distinct political leaning. The way the public has access to and is influenced by the press differs significantly as compared with the broadcast media.

During elections, quantitative analysis involves recording, measuring and coding the space allocated to the coverage of relevant political parties and other entities, such as the government and the president. It also includes measuring the time spent on items or topics relating to the elections to determine whether the elections were presented in the media as an important political event. Qualitative analysis looks at the professionalism and accuracy of the media coverage of elections, the use of language, intentional manipulation, etc.

MONITORING DIFFERENT TYPES OF PROGRAMMES



News programmes primarily provide information. They should reflect a variety of news which is relevant, fresh, accurate, balanced and factual, and they should in principle refrain from stating opinions. It is important that a fair and equitable mechanism should be established to determine the proportion of election news coverage to be allocated to election contestants. They should receive news coverage commensurate with their importance in the election and the extent of their electoral support. The law usually lays down general provisions on the equal treatment of contestants. However, importantly, it should be within the editorial discretion of each media outlet to determine the specific election formats and

models on the basis of which they will allocate airtime to contestants. For example, the amount of news coverage devoted to the competing parties is strictly controlled in the United Kingdom (UK), as the BBC takes measures to ensure parity among the competing parties. In a number of Council of Europe member states, broadcast media are frequently criticised for not providing comprehensive and analytical coverage of the campaign, contestants and their platforms which would enable the electorate to make a more informed choice at the ballot box.



Televised debates provide the best forum for exchanges of views. An opportunity for public debate of differing viewpoints offers voters an improved understanding of the choices available to them on election day. As a supplement to news, these programmes offer commentary, debate or an opportunity for competing interests to present their opinions directly to viewers and listeners. However, the decision on how such fairness should be achieved (for instance, deciding the format, the number of participants, the length, etc) should be left to the initiative of the broadcasting organisation itself.

In general, there is no need to overexpose small parties – in particular, if this is done at the expense of more relevant parties. Significant minor parties should also receive some coverage during the campaign, for example at the time of their manifesto launch.



Talk show formats are attractive for viewers because they present a diversity of ideas and provide a good opportunity for voters to receive more information about candidates. It is, however, important to establish some rules for talk shows too as if they are left totally uncontrolled they can mislead, misrepresent and misinform many viewers. It is consequently important for candidates to be treated fairly when it comes to designing formats of talk shows during elections.



DECIDING WHAT ACTORS TO MONITOR

The list of subjects for monitoring should be determined prior to the launch of the activity. The only relevant entities are those subjects that can be clearly identified as particular political parties or groupings. Certain political terms (for instance “opposition” or “authorities”) commonly used in political communication are frequently to be found in the media. However, they should be included in the list of relevant subjects only when these terms are not used vaguely but represent concrete political forces recognised as such in society.

For the purpose of monitoring political diversity in media reporting during elections, it is important to include the president, the government, local government, registered candidates, parliamentary parties and relevant non-parliamentary parties. When it comes to monitoring the government, it is important to have a list of ministers and deputy ministers and to circulate it to all monitors. If the incumbents (the president and government ministers) are seeking re-election, it is important to include both the coverage these subjects receive as state officials as well as the time they are allocated as candidates.

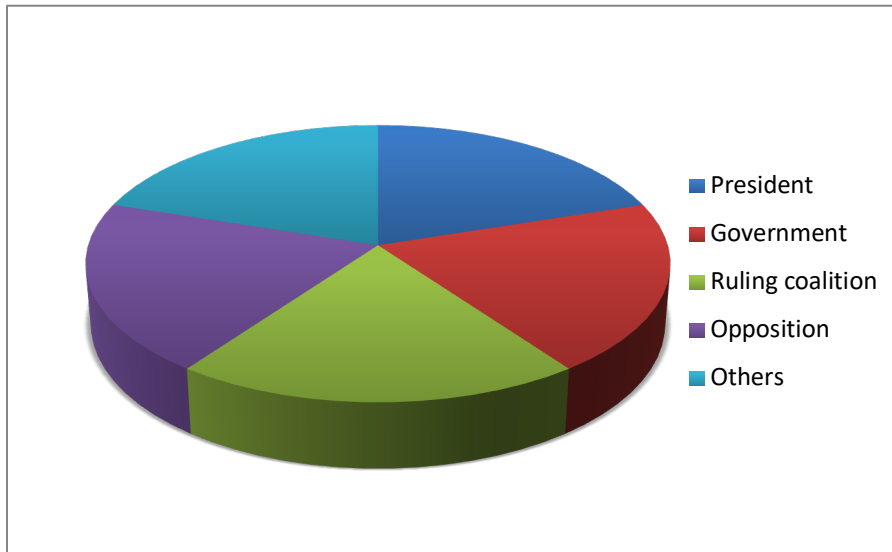


CHART 3 SHOWS THE ACTORS WHICH SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE MONITORING OF POLITICAL DIVERSITY PRIOR TO ELECTIONS

MEDIA ANALYSIS: WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO DETERMINE?

The monitoring of media coverage prior to elections seeks to address three main concerns, the rights of voters, contestants and the media. More specifically, the monitor aim to determine if voters are able to receive sufficient information to make informed choices at the ballot box, if all contestants have unimpeded access to the media on a non-discriminatory basis and if the media are free to cover the elections.

For the purpose of monitoring, we use quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis. Quantitative analysis focuses on the amount of time allocated to selected political subjects and the tone of the coverage, namely the way in which these subjects are portrayed – positive, neutral or negative. The monitoring also focuses on the thematic and geographical structure of news, evaluating thematic and geographical diversity by measuring the actual time devoted to different topics and focusing on the geographical area from where the news is broadcast. The monitoring could also focus on the top stories during the monitoring period and compare them in different phases of the campaign.

It is the behaviour of the media outlets that is being assessed, not the subjects monitored. Positive and negative ratings refer to whether the viewer/reader is offered a positive or negative impression of the subject or topic. Monitors give an evaluation mark to all subjects, in addition to looking at time allowed and references, in order to provide information on how the subject is portrayed by each media outlet. The evaluation mark is thus allocated to all subjects monitored in order to determine whether the subject is presented in a positive, negative, or neutral light. It is important for monitors to consider the actual evaluation of the subject monitored as well as the context of the story or item.

When using quantitative monitoring, it is necessary to establish the *unit of analysis*. This refers to the different blocks of broadcast time that are monitored, measured and assigned various codes. The *unit of analysis* is determined according to what sort of monitoring is being conducted. For example, in the case of advertising, the unit is each advertisement.

When monitoring the media coverage of elections, it is the actual time and space given to each subject monitored (either as a reference or in the form of direct coverage).

The *unit of analysis* is monitored in relation to the *unit of context*, depending on what is being monitored. The *unit of context* for advertising is both the hour and the day (or 24 hours) since there are legal obligations concerning the proportion of advertising that can be broadcast within each hour and in the course of a day. For a news item, the *unit of context* can be the entire news programme, as it is also important to determine the order in which different items are broadcast (because some politicians/political parties could always be covered at the beginning of the news and others always at the end – see also the positioning of news items in the qualitative analysis). In addition, the *unit of context* can also be the news programmes in a longer period (two weeks) – in order to determine if a story is balanced over a period of time (e.g. if it is reported over a longer period).

In order to monitor the broadcast media (television and radio), monitors use stopwatches (or any available computer application) to measure the actual “direct appearance time” of previously selected subjects. They also separately record each instance where a subject is mentioned indirectly (e.g. by a news presenter or someone else) as a “reference”. For example, when subject A speaks about subject B, it is important to record both the time allocated to subject A to speak (direct time) and the time given to subject B (indirect time). The evaluation of the data is based on the total time (both direct and indirect) allocated to different subjects monitored in the period concerned (see Appendix 2 *Useful Tips for a Media Monitoring Project* for an example on how to calculate the time).

Tone

Quantitative analysis also evaluates whether the information about selected monitored subjects is positive, negative, or neutral in its content. Positive and negative ratings refer to whether a viewer is given a positive or negative impression of the subject or topic. These data are recorded for all stories and presented graphically to illustrate differences between outlets and differences over time.

For online media, monitors measure the space dedicated to relevant subjects in pixels using a page ruler (an add-on in Google Chrome) As for indirect references in online media, monitors record them as “remarks”.

Positive and negative evaluation refers to whether a viewer is offered a positive or negative impression of the subject or topic.

It is important that monitors think how an article or TV/Radio programme influences an average voter and do not speculate about how it is perceived by specific party supporters – they should use their common sense.

It is important to remember that there is no expectation that news should be neutral.

Media should not be afraid to present reality as it is and to convey people's emotions and positive or critical/negative viewpoints. Neutrality should not be seen as an ultimate goal, as people are not interested in watching superficial and sterile news. In dealing with news, media should present all sides of the story with a comparable time and manner of presentation to avoid any preference or bias.

The mere existence of positive or negative ratings attributed to monitored subjects do not indicate bias, providing that the respective media outlets treat all monitored subjects in a similar manner. However, where there is a visible longer-term tendency to always report on some subjects in a positive manner and to criticise others, this could indicate bias.

To eliminate any elements of subjectivity present in quantitative or qualitative analysis, there should be frequent checks on how individual monitors analyse the media by a monitoring co-ordinator. Where there is a difference of opinion over the evaluation of a particular item, the entire monitoring team (or team leader) evaluates the item before making a final decision on its "tone." Ultimately, there could be a very small number of occasions when there will be a difference in the tone evaluation – between positive and neutral and negative and neutral – but such differences apply to only a few seconds of the coverage, a duration which is statistically irrelevant in a monitoring period of not less than two weeks.

Indicators in media monitoring (as in all social science research) have to meet two important criteria. They must be both *reliable* and *valid*.

The common indicators generally used in the monitoring methodology described here are the sources of information identified in broadcasts, the topics covered and, of course, the time allocated to different topics and speakers. If we want to carry out a more complex evaluation, we need to add other indicators. A statistical analysis of these indicators is not especially complex. The monitoring data gathered during a monitoring exercise are *descriptive* rather than *inferential*. This means that the analysis only addresses the actual broadcasts that have been monitored and does not attempt to predict the characteristics of other broadcasts that have not been monitored (by techniques such as *regression analysis*).

The main analytical techniques used in the media monitoring methodology are *aggregation* and *cross-tabulation*. Aggregation simply consists of adding up (and comparing) data such as the amount of direct and indirect broadcast time allocated to politicians or other subjects monitored. Cross-tabulation or crossing variables, which is easily carried out even with basic spreadsheet software, compares the frequency distribution of a variable with another variable to check their degree of association. This could indicate, for example, if a politician was quoted more by one television station than another. A more complex analysis could show the association between the topics reported by the media and the sources they use. The possibilities for crossing variables are extensive.

Qualitative media monitoring is used to assess the performance of media against benchmarks, such as ethical or professional standards, that cannot be easily quantified. These standards include but are not limited to balance, accuracy, timeliness, choice of issues, omission of information, advantage of incumbency, positioning of items, inflammatory language, etc. These data are then reported separately and integrated into the comments and conclusions of the narrative reports. For instance, while the quantitative assessment can

define whether political advertising has been broadcast within the legally permissible limits (in terms of its length or within a prescribed broadcast segment), it cannot determine if a particular advertisement has contained inflammatory language or hate speech.

Unlike quantitative monitoring, which follows a set of clear criteria, qualitative monitoring is more “subjective” as it depends on the opinion of an individual monitor. At the same time, even qualitative monitoring is based on legal or ethical standards – so it is not simply a reflection of what the monitor likes or does not like. It is consequently possible to conduct qualitative monitoring in a consistent and scientific manner.

For example, it is useful to conduct qualitative monitoring when we are interested in evaluating the overall quality of media reporting. In such a case, we would focus on the content of stories and on important aspects of the information presented by monitored media, such as its quality and variety. We would assess the overall quality of reporting provided by each TV channel, based on its overall informational value.

Other relevant issues that should be covered by qualitative monitoring are:

- Is there any relevant information missing? Media often avoid the problem of how to cover politically sensitive stories by simply not covering them at all. The omission of information is one of the most effective manipulation techniques.
- Choice of issues – Does the selection of news items favour the agenda of one party or another, even if there is no explicit bias?
- Similar style of coverage – Are different candidates’ campaign events reported in a similar way (for example, is actuality footage always used or are direct quotations provided in all cases) or are only some of them?
- The incumbent factor – Are the activities of incumbent officeholders who are also candidates properly reported or are the two roles confused to the incumbents’ advantage?
- Positioning of items – Are items about the opposition placed alongside unfavourable stories (e.g. foreign accounts of political violence) to create an unfavourable impression?
- Prioritising – Are some candidates always reported ahead of others in the sequence of bulletins?
- Inflammatory language – Are inflammatory language or actual incidents of violence reported in an accurate, sober and balanced manner, with all sides quoted? Or is media reporting itself inflammatory and unbalanced, with the danger that it could lead to further violence?
- Manipulative use of film, picture and sound – camera angles, distance of the camera from the candidates, light, sound quality, use of footage which does not correspond to the content of the story or gives the story a negative or positive spin.

A key component of the monitoring methodology described here is that it is a qualitative approach to monitoring media content.

For each day's coverage, monitors complete a monitoring form, which should be reviewed by a data enterer who will enter the data into a special monitoring programme (database).

The methodologies described above could be used in conjunction with a widely available

Frequent and periodical **inspections of the database** are an essential part of the media monitoring methodology in order to avoid systematic or accidental errors.

spreadsheet or database software (such as Microsoft Excel or Access), with a more sophisticated analysis carried out through a specialised statistical package, if required. The last phase of working with data is data processing – computer data processing and storage has several advantages:

- Possibility of storing data in a PC
- Flexibility and simplicity of data manipulation, e.g. specific data selection and evaluation
- Ability to create graphics and their direct use in presentations

Since the monitoring forms include a relatively small number of different data types and the data can be easily organised according to the given criteria, Microsoft Excel (in combination with the entire Microsoft Office package) is suitable for processing the results of a monitoring exercise. The data acquired during the monitoring consist of subject/affiliation, time (direct, indirect and total), evaluation, item start, item end, topic and its time.

As an example, let us assume that media monitors will use a monitoring form designed with Microsoft Excel. It will contain five different sheets:

- Codes
- Topics
- Political
- Media effects
- Media effects explanation

In the Codes sheets, monitors could find different codes (acronyms) used for topics, top stories, media effects (in the upper part of the sheet) and subjects & names in the lower part.

REPORTING

Interim reports could be prepared in the course of the campaign to share preliminary media monitoring findings and trends, so as to highlight the problems and trends identified. An interim report provides a basic description of the main trends and supports them with one or two best examples to make them clear.

The final report is divided into several parts, including the introduction, statistical methods used, results of the monitoring and the conclusions and recommendations. It should include more concrete examples highlighting the trends and potential breaches of the law. It can also include quotations, appendices, references or reviews.

In the case of the introduction, it is important to explain the purpose of the report and the methods used for collating data, to provide an overview of the analysis and, finally, to mention the results. It is important to write it in a way that is interesting for a reader, who should be tempted to find out what lies inside. As for the methodology used, it is important to properly explain all the calculations and methods employed for collecting and analysing the data.

With regard to the actual monitoring results, it is necessary to provide good insights into the media's performance and explain the background and context so that everyone can understand it. The reports should be designed in such a way as to convey the most important information first. The technical details can always be highlighted later in the body of the report. Good monitoring reports make the most important information easy to find so that busy readers, many of whom will not have time to read a report in full, can identify what they need to know without searching for it.

Moreover, care must be taken regarding the way the monitoring terms and jargon are used as it is necessary to make sure that most readers can understand them, regardless of their knowledge of monitoring and data analysis methods.

It is good to use tables, charts and graphics that help illustrate the results of the data analysis and write text references that explain the important findings. When writing text references, it is necessary to highlight what is important about each table and graphic and not only report the data. Consequently, the charts should be as self-explanatory as possible. In addition, tables and other graphics should be positioned close to the text that references them.

It is important to provide a proper conclusion to the study. The basis of this conclusion will be a thorough analysis and commentary on any changes suggested. It is possible to prove a point if the data are complete, correct, and clear.

How to monitor social media

In recent years, the manner in which people receive political messages has changed profoundly, also in relation to the growing impact of social media networks. These changes have also brought with them some negative phenomena, such as a substantial increase in unverified, decontextualised, and manipulative information, which confirms many individuals' prejudices and biases. It is increasingly apparent that thanks to social media networks various stakeholders may take advantage of existing social divisions either by conducting their activity from outside national borders (as was notably the case for the first time during the 2016 US presidential election) or by being active directly in the country where the elections are held. Experience from several countries suggests that the risk of abuse increases several-fold in a period of intensified political and social engagement, such as elections. Increasing attention is being paid to social media networks and to disinformation as a potential threat to the integrity of elections.

An increase in the influence of social media networks also brings with it some advantages, including the possibility of obtaining information directly from a source in the form and volume that society learns to accept and reflect in a meaningful way. During an election campaign, this enables candidates to communicate immediately and directly with voters or

to mobilise them. Social media networks have become a very important source of political information and messages in general, all the more so during elections – they completely change the perception of politics when the filter of traditional media is bypassed. This chapter provides some general hints and ideas for civil society groups wishing to analyse how various social media networks are used during elections: whether they increase and improve voters’ awareness or their mobilisation or whether they spread disinformation or even outright lies. It draws upon the methodological framework and toolkit designed by Democracy Reporting International (DRI) and MEMO 98 under their joint project *A toolkit to help monitoring social media during elections in the EU*.¹ The monitoring could provide a basis for responsive advocacy (such as intervention with firms) and long-term advocacy for better regulation.

It is important to understand that there are substantial differences between traditional media and social media analyses. While clear benchmarks exist for judging the role of television, radio or print media during elections, there are no such benchmarks in the case of social media networks. Both international standards and domestic laws and regulations impose obligations for different types of traditional media. These are stricter with regard to broadcast media and less strict where print media are concerned. These regulations guide the monitoring organisers in choosing what media to focus on (media sampling) as well as what criteria to apply for the analysis of different types of programmes. For example, given the importance of prime-time news as an important source of information, stricter editorial rules apply – which is also reflected in the monitoring as the methodology of news monitoring is the most detailed in comparison with other programmes.

Conversely, while debates or talk shows are very important platforms for contestants to communicate their views to voters, they have to observe different editorial standards than news broadcasts. All of these nuances should be reflected in a monitoring methodology. In the case of social media networks, their role and impact on elections is still being analysed, and more time is needed. Given the very specific television or radio time slots to be analysed, or specific sections in online or print media devoted to political and election coverage, the number of monitors/coders needed for a monitoring exercise is clear. By comparison, the amount of information available on social media networks is huge, which is why it is important to use technological tools to filter and analyse the data. Both approaches have certain advantages and disadvantages but, clearly, at this stage even the most sophisticated

¹ The toolkit is available at www.memo98.sk

tools are not able to replace human coders in determining different types of manipulations and biases.

Traditional media monitoring	Social media monitoring
Clear benchmarks to judge the media	Unclear benchmarks to judge social media
Clear on - WHAT to focus (media sample) WHEN to focus HOW to analyse	Not so clear – WHAT to monitor WHEN to monitor HOW to monitor
Clear on WHAT TOOLS to use	Different TOOLS exist for SMM
Reliance on human coders & monitors	There is a need to use technology (AI)
Clear on purpose of media monitoring	Why we monitor social media during elections?

CHART 4: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SOCIAL AND TRADITIONAL MEDIA MONITORING

Social media networks entail new challenges for election observers who are monitoring them. Not only do they have to deal with huge amounts of data and try to determine which are most relevant to focus on, but developments are emerging fast and in real time, making it even more difficult for analysts to cope. It is also important to remember that a good deal of information in the public sphere is no longer under editorial control by journalistic “gatekeepers” who used to have a significant say on what information was presented to the public. It is now up to the private big tech companies in charge of the algorithms to decide what users are more likely to see. According to a PACE report, “the increase of content production and the centralisation of online distribution channels such as Twitter, Google and Facebook have had several unintended consequences:

- the proliferation of private and public disinformation tactics,
- the arrival of non-regulated private actors in the democratic arena that literally “own” the information infrastructure and gateways to information.”²

According to ACE, the Electoral Knowledge Network, “the line between traditional media and new media is blurred, with many ‘traditional’ journalists using the internet as a key source of information for stories, and many traditional media creating online editions or transforming into fully multi-media outlets. Also, traditional media use ‘citizen journalism’ pieces and rely on personal mobile phone images and video to cover some stories where they

² Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) Report 15028, “[Democracy hacked? How to respond?](#)”, 8 January 2020.

do not have their own reporters.”³ To enhance the distribution of their content, traditional news media have positioned themselves within the social media networks. At the same time, Facebook, Google, Twitter and other social media networks have become important platforms via which news can be generated, so social media networks function both independently of, and in conjunction with, news outlets as sources and distributors of news and information.⁴

Standards employed by domestic election observers for the analysis of social media networks include:

- international legal obligations accepted by almost all United Nations member states, in particular the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the standards of the Council of Europe, which are part of international law;
- national laws (such as fundamental rights enshrined in constitutions or criminal legislation against defamation);
- self-regulation by social media companies that applies in every country in which they do business.

VOTING UNDER THE INFLUENCE

United Nations Committee on Human Rights’ General Comment 25 protects the voters’ right to form opinions independently, free of manipulative interference of any kind



There is a need to lay down a general methodological framework for observing social media. The existing international standards on freedom of expression and the right to participation are an appropriate starting point to identify benchmarks for

observation and assessment. In particular, the United Nations Committee on Human Rights’ General Comment 25, which protects voters’ right to form opinions independently and free of manipulative interference of any kind, can offer a basis for social media assessment:

“Persons entitled to vote must be free to vote for any candidate for election and for or against any proposal submitted to referendum or plebiscite, and free to support or to oppose government, without undue influence or coercion of any kind which may distort or inhibit the free expression of the elector’s will. Voters should be able to form opinions independently, free of violence or threat of violence, compulsion, inducement or manipulative interference of any kind.”⁵

The reference to undue influence, distortion, inhibition and manipulative interference shows the relevance of General Comment 25 for the quality of public discourse, which is very important during elections.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ <http://compact-media.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/D2.2-REPORT-ON-NATIONAL-COURTS-SOCIAL-MEDIA-CONVERGENCE-.pdf>.

⁵ UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment 25, 1996, para. 19.

SCOPE OF MONITORING

Prior to any monitoring of social media networks, it is recommended to conduct a capacity assessment to determine the scope of the monitoring.

DECIDING WHAT SOCIAL MEDIA TO MONITOR



It is important to know which social media networks are the most influential in each country where the monitoring will take place. In order to obtain this information, it is possible to consult the Global Digital Reports prepared by *We Are Social*, an agency for digital communication, and *Hootsuite*, which contain details on the use of the internet, social media, mobile technology and e-

commerce around the world, information that is publicly available and broken down by country and region. The reports show how social media are used in a given country and break the data down by categories such as age and gender.

Having determined the most influential social media networks, it is important to consider the human and financial resources available for the monitoring as well as the tools to be used for data scraping. Access to data is one of the biggest challenges in the case of social media analysis, as data policies are constantly changing. Following the Cambridge Analytica scandal, Facebook and other social media companies are now much more careful about providing access to data on their platforms.

Depending on the focus of the monitoring, it is necessary to consider if it is possible to obtain API access, which varies from platform to platform. Twitter is the platform most open to data collection, but it is not so relevant for monitoring as Facebook (which is more popular). The latter shares data only with specific partners, giving them access to a tool called [Crowdtangle](#) which it acquired in 2017. There are different commercial tools which could also be used for data scraping and analysis.⁶ It is always important to determine what are the specific objectives of the project and make sure to select the proper tool which will provide the necessary data access.

For example, [Newswhip](#) allows analysts to look for content on a specific topic that goes viral on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter and websites. Specific keywords can be entered and Newswhip returns data collected from different social media platforms, with the number of times a specific link about a given topic was shared. It also predicts the impact of a given link using past interactions as a proxy to predict future popularity.

⁶ There are alternatives which require a paid subscription and can be expensive for a smaller CSO. For example, these are Newswhip, Buzzumo, Visibrain, Sysmos, Talkwalker,, and BrandWatch.

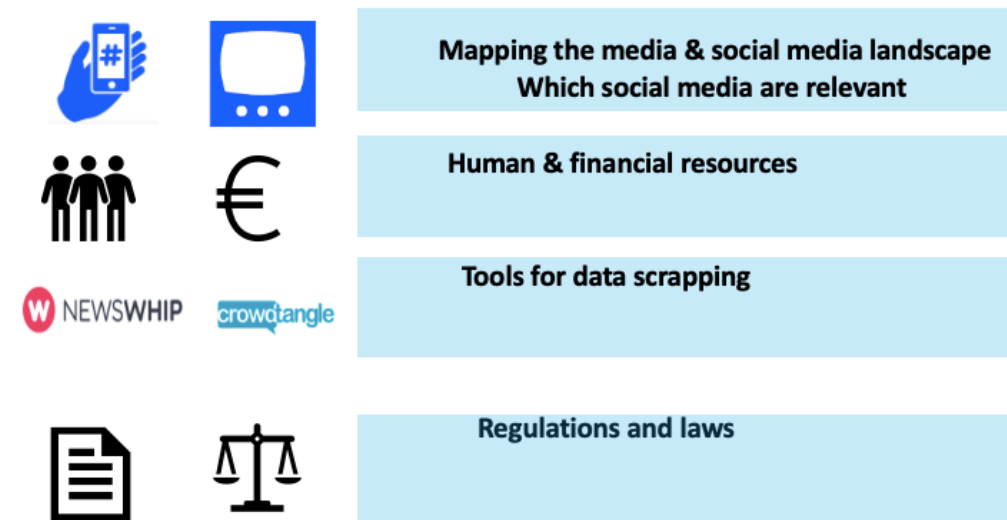
MONITORING SAMPLE – WHICH SOCIAL MEDIA TO FOCUS ON



Monitoring messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber or Messenger, is even more difficult due to the encrypted character of their design. Some analyses have been carried out using data from public groups on WhatsApp, but it is important to remember that importing data from users in public groups on a platform where users assume that their data privacy is respected raises ethical considerations about possible breaches of that privacy.

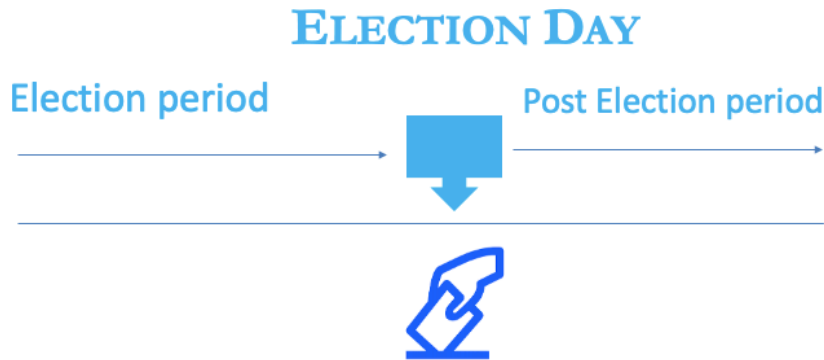
If laws regulating social media networks exist, monitoring whether the legal requirements are being met is important. Many aspects of social media campaigning are not yet regulated, so focus on compliance with the law may be limited.

CAPACITY ASSESSMENT – THINGS TO CONSIDER



MONITORING PERIOD

MONITORING PERIOD



When to start monitoring?

financial and human. It is clear that within the lifespan of the monitoring, the intensity of the political discourse will vary, with the peak expected closer to election day. It is important to cover at least the election period, which is usually between one to two months before the elections.

It is important to decide when to start and when to finish social media monitoring and to have a clear project schedule, including deadlines and cut-off dates for monitors so that they know when to submit their reports and entered data sheets or forms. For the sake of the data validity, it is good to start earlier rather than later, depending on the available resources – both

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

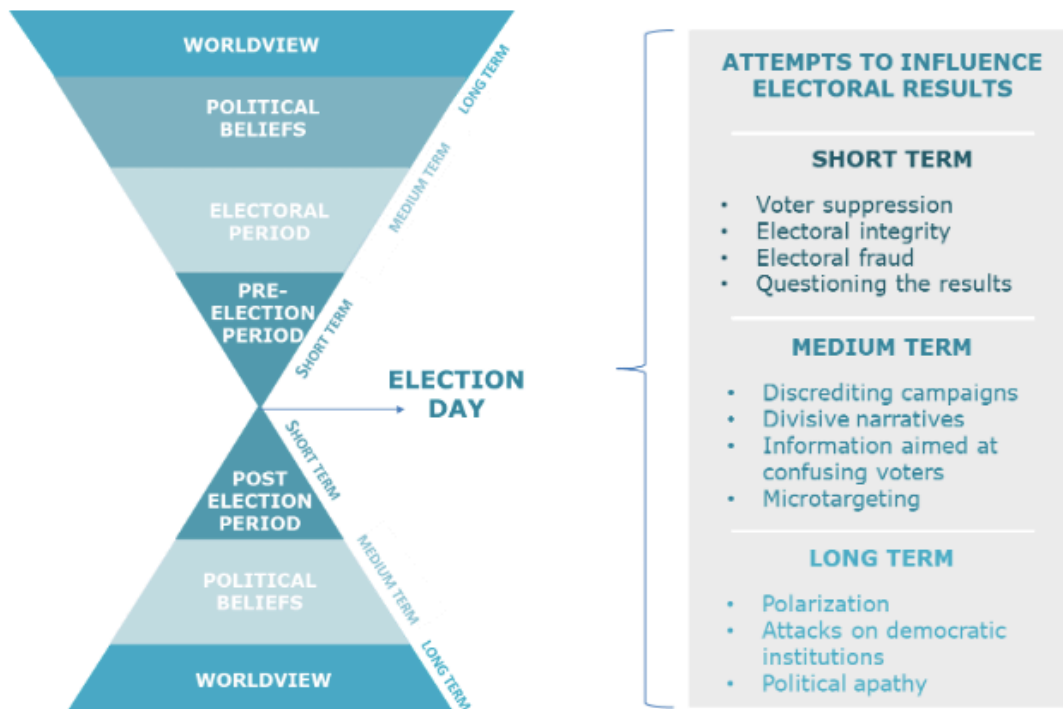


CHART 5 DEMOCRACY REPORTING INTERNATIONAL SHOWS PRE-ELECTION AND POST-ELECTION PERIODS IN TERMS OF POTENTIAL ATTEMPTS TO INFLUENCE ELECTORAL RESULTS BY SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS AND DISINFORMATION

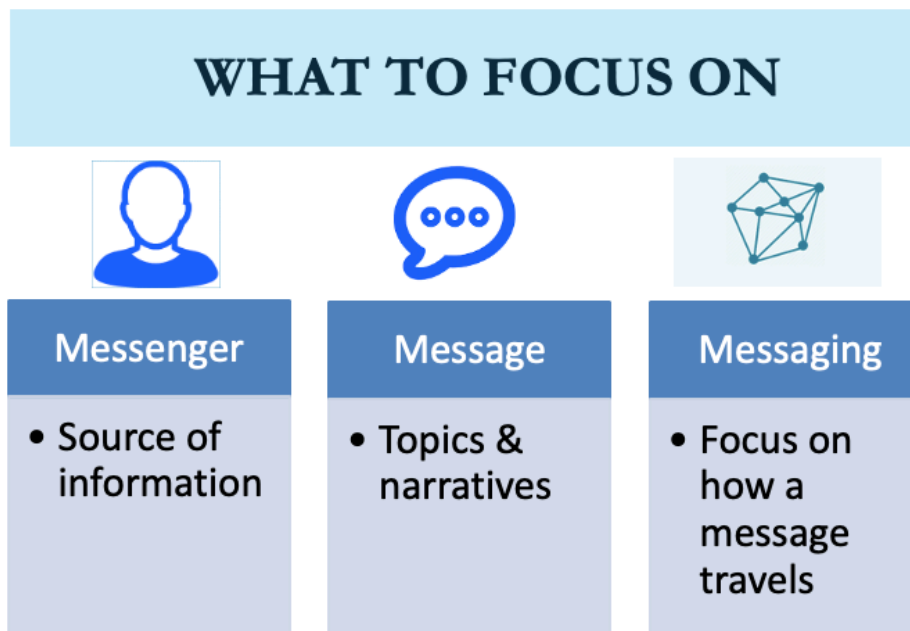
In Chart No 5, Democracy Reporting International (DRI) has divided the election run-up period and the post-election period into different time segments, ranging from long term and mid term to short term.⁷ The long-term period is when our worldview and political beliefs are formed, whereas medium term and short term coincide with an election period. Where potential attempts to influence electoral results via social media networks are concerned, in the longer-term period, one might see attempts to polarise and get people to feel apathy, as well as attacks on democratic institutions (media and CSOs). In the medium term period, there might be various campaigns to discredit candidates or officials (undermining their credibility), the spreading of divisive narratives (aimed at vulnerable groups such as migrants), the transmission of confusing messages to mislead voters or microtargeting (a technique used by political parties that includes data-mining techniques employed by direct marketing and involving predictive market segmentation). In the short term, there might be attempts at voter suppression and attacks on electoral integrity, claiming electoral fraud or questioning election results.

⁷ For more information, check the Guide for Civil Society on Monitoring Social Media During Elections developed by DRI, with contributions from an expert working group.

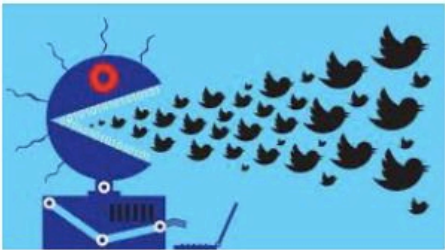
ACTORS TO BE MONITORED

With regard to the actors and other matters to focus on during the monitoring of social media networks, it is possible to look at three different areas – **messenger**, **message** and **messaging**. The messenger is the actor who spreads the message (source of information) – so it could be a political party or candidate, a media outlet (using social media profiles to promote stories) or a social media influencer (a person with substantial number of followers and supporters on social media networks).

The actual message consists of the topics and narratives disseminated by actors (messengers). Messaging is the way the message travels on social media networks (for example, is it amplified by inauthentic actors – bots – or trolls or is it boosted as sponsored content?). To determine which actors are relevant, it is possible to use a tool for actor mapping called [Socialbakers](#) which provides data about which pages are most influential in a given country, dividing them by category (politics, media, NGOs, etc). The platform is fee-based (its free version is limited).

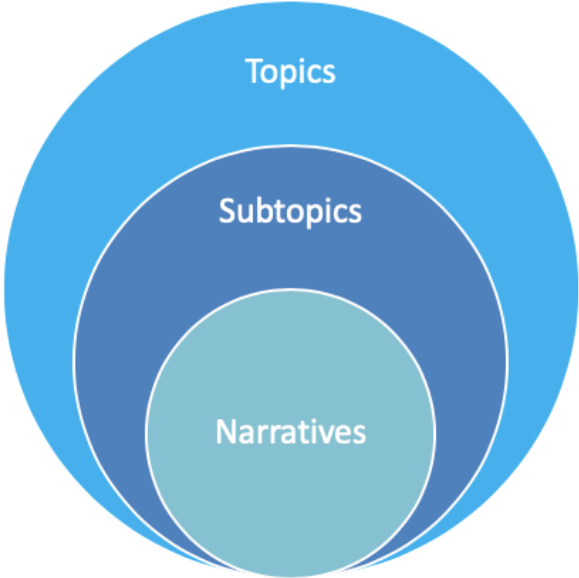


MESSAGING



TOPICS AND NARRATIVES TO BE MONITORED

MESSAGE



When it comes to monitoring messages, it is important to pay attention to potential external and internal disinformation efforts aimed at undermining citizens' trust in the democratic institutions and elections as such. Content analysis of narratives is used to see if such narratives are employed by any political

parties/stakeholders involved in the elections with the aim of spreading disinformation and confusion. This method identifies a series of selected "narratives" – deliberately expressed views – on a particular issue and counts the frequency with which they appear in posts.

Choosing the narratives varies country to country. Many can be predicted on the basis of the political discourse in the country but monitors should be ready to add new ones as they proceed with their work when it turns out that an important narrative is becoming the subject of considerable debate (see examples of different social media monitoring projects which also focused on monitoring narratives in Appendix 4 *Examples of Social Media Monitoring Projects*).

In the long-term context, the intention of such monitoring is to focus on the social drivers, and therefore the frustrations that are spreading into an ever-wider national and international sphere and are implicitly reflected in some of the narratives. The monitoring of narratives assesses whether they are present on the monitored accounts and whether they have received any significant attention (interactions).

It is also important to look at potential signs of hate speech and inflammatory language (used in posts) as well as attempts to discredit political opponents. Finally, the monitoring could in a broader sense try to determine if information posted on social media networks focuses on important public policy issues or if actors are just trying to grab people's attention by focusing on scandals, conspiracies and myths.

TOOLS AVAILABLE FOR DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

There are many different tools available depending on the actual goal of the monitoring. Regardless of the specific goal, the best option is to gain full access to social media networks' API. For example, Twitter provides more direct access to researchers via its API (or via Gnip, a Twitter owned API aggregator company). In the case of Facebook, it is more difficult to obtain such access given the previous problems mentioned above. The best possible option is to access Facebook and Instagram data via Crowdtangle which provides detailed data on how many interactions a specific post/link/video receives, and which posts/videos have been most shared. Access to Crowdtangle allows monitoring organisations to easily spot content that goes viral and check whether it contains false information or not. To date, Crowdtangle is the most advanced platform to perform social media monitoring on Facebook and Instagram, but access given researchers is not yet widespread.

ANALYSING AND CHOOSING RELEVANT DATA

The monitoring tries to evaluate what kind of content is published by different actors on social media networks and to assess to what extent this information is useful for voters so that they can make more informed choices at the ballot box. The monitoring also tries to evaluate to what extent parties, candidates and other stakeholders use social media networks for campaigning and voter mobilisation and voter education.

The actual monitoring process is conducted as follows. Monitors review all posts which are published in the monitoring period but focus only on those that mention the narratives or topics monitored. The frequency of the appearance of these narratives can then be quantified. The intention is to monitor output over a given period in order to determine, first, how much coverage the monitored narrative receives and, second, what the reaction on social media networks is (how many interactions – shares, comments and reactions).

A similar method would be to identify certain *keywords* commonly used in conjunction with the subject matter. As with the monitoring of narratives, monitors simply identify the items that refer to the chosen narratives and count the frequency of appearance of the predetermined keywords.

Quantitative criteria of social media monitoring

- Collecting basic data (number of followers, likes), which provide a certain outline of their social media presence/popularity
- To what extent parties and candidates use social media networks (campaign strategy)
- Approaching voters with voter information messages
- Are political parties using groups and/or any other social media platforms to expand their reach and/or spread their message to voters?
- Creating specific hashtags for elections
- Interaction with voters
- Paying for (or boosting) the content – crosschecking posts with the Ad Library (Facebook and Instagram)

Following actual posts

- Count the number of posts throughout a certain period
- Focus on what political parties or politicians refer to in their posts – list of topics and how many comments which post generates
- The unit of analysis is one post
- Inflammatory language (hate speech)
- Disinformation and propaganda, determining if there are bots and trolls – general efforts to divert the discussion on specific issues and topics

Depending on the actual data mining tool used, we can extract the data from the public accounts of selected stakeholders' profiles and enter them into Microsoft Excel sheets.

This will enable information to be collected on the type of post, post link, post message, picture, the time of posting, interactions, likes, shares, comments, reactions and other forms of engagement.

Consequently, it is possible to further analyse the actual content of the posts and code it according to a list of narratives and topics, taking into consideration various aspects ranging from more general topics and issues (such as social issues, gender equality or education) to more local and specific issues and narratives.

PUBLISHING REPORTS: FORMAT AND FREQUENCY

In general, the same principles apply to reporting on the social media monitoring as to reporting on monitoring traditional media (see also Section 3 *Reporting*). The following are some suggestions for writing monitoring reports. In general, as with media monitoring reports there are two different formats – interim (preliminary) and final reports.

Interim report

Interim reports could be prepared in the course of the campaign to inform readers about the preliminary social media monitoring findings and trends and highlight the problems and trends identified. The interim report provides a basic description of the main trends.

Final report

The final report is divided into several parts, including the introduction, statistical methods used, results of the monitoring and the conclusion and recommendations. The report should include more concrete examples highlighting the trends and potential breaches of the law. It can also include quotations, appendices, references or reviews.

In the case of the introduction, it is important to explain the purpose of the report and the methods used for collating data, to provide an overview of the analysis and, finally, to mention the results. It is important to write it in a way that is interesting for a reader, who should be tempted to find out what lies inside. As for the methodology used, it is important to properly explain all the calculations, methods and tools employed for data mining and analysing the data.

With regard to the actual monitoring results, it is necessary to provide good insights into the social media's performance and explain the background and context so that everyone can understand it. The reports should be designed in such a way as to convey the most important information first. The technical details can always be highlighted later in the body of the report. Good monitoring reports make the most important information easy to find so that busy readers, many of whom will not have time to read a report in full, can identify what they need to know without searching for it.

Moreover, care must be taken in the way the monitoring terms and jargon are used as it is necessary to make sure that most readers can understand them, regardless of their knowledge of monitoring and data analysis methods.

It is good to use the tables, charts and graphics that help illustrate the results of the data analysis, and to

write text references that explain the important findings. When writing text references, it is necessary to highlight what is important about each table and graphic and not only report the data. Consequently, the charts should be as self-explanatory as possible. In addition, tables and other graphics should be positioned close to the text that references them.

It is important to provide a proper conclusion to the study. A thorough analysis will form the basis of this conclusion and any changes suggested. It is possible to prove a point if the data are complete, correct, and clear.

DATA INTERPRETATION

The interpretation of numeric data needs to be done carefully, taking into account not only what statistical tables show but also possible reasons for the values reported in them. Accordingly, it is always important to explain the main trends in the media monitoring and support each with one or more concrete examples. The media analyst needs to describe a phenomenon, in this case media performance, but he or she also has to be able to explain it. There is no general model for interpreting data. What follows are some simple indications that can improve the reading of data and make it easier to analyse them.

ROADMAP FOR SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

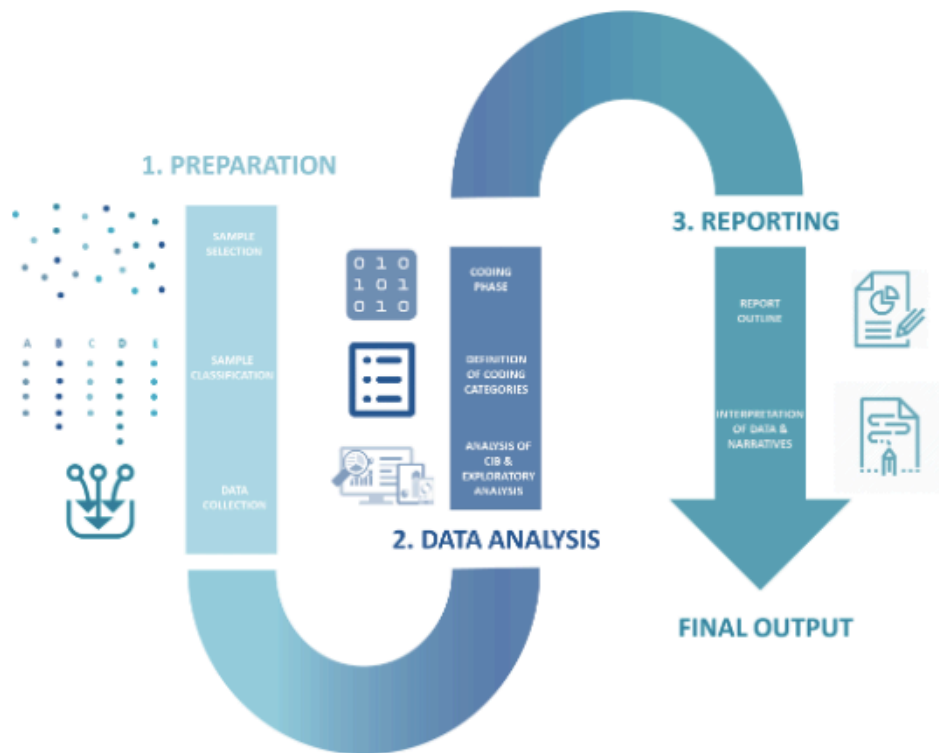


CHART 6 DRI SHOWS THE PROCESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING ANALYSIS

How to engage monitoring actors and ensure synergy between stakeholders and the sustainability of monitoring results

It is important to ensure that media monitoring by a civil society organisation fits well into the pre-election context in a country where such monitoring is possible. This type of monitoring should not be understood as a substitute for any other type of monitoring conducted by different stakeholders entitled to monitor the media. If it is clear that a media regulator or any other body entitled to oversee the media coverage during elections does not have any plans to conduct comprehensive monitoring of that coverage (due to a lack of capacity or resources), monitoring by a civil society organisation (if carried out properly and using sound methodology) could be an important element in increasing the overall integrity of elections.

Who monitors the media?

- Academics
- Election observers
- NGOs
- Market researchers
- Regulators
- Media

Pre-election media monitoring could be conducted by academics, international election observers, non-governmental organisations, market researchers, media regulators and the media themselves. The media monitor their own output to look into their own profile, to see how they cover important issues and to determine whether their coverage complies with the

law and is ethical and fair. The media and journalists should, as appropriate, support effective systems of self-regulation whether at the level of specific media sectors (such as press complaints bodies) or of individual media outlets (ombudsmen or public editors) which include standards on striving for accuracy in the news, including by offering a right of correction and/or reply to address inaccurate statements in the media.

A media regulator monitors media coverage for compliance with licence conditions, for local content and language requirements, for compliance with the law on advertising, for political balance, for social pluralism and for general compliance with the law and the constitution. Media monitoring gives the regulator more effective tools for investigating media coverage issues. When a broadcaster fails to respect the law or the conditions specified in the licence, the regulatory authorities should have the power to impose sanctions, in accordance with the law. Media regulators or other relevant bodies are obliged to oversee how the media report on contestants and identify any manipulations or biases, based on their analyses. Systematic media monitoring assists media regulators in identifying violations and taking prompt corrective action. During elections, the results of such analyses demonstrate how the media behave and keep the public and contestants aware of relevant issues. When shortcomings are identified, corrective action should be taken to improve media coverage or protect media rights and freedoms.

Why does a regulator monitor broadcasters?

- For compliance with license conditions
- For local content and language requirements
- For compliance with the law on advertising
- For political balance
- For social pluralism
- For general compliance with the law and constitution

It is essential that civil society organisations monitoring media create synergy and co-operation with other relevant electoral stakeholders, including media regulators, state bodies responsible for overseeing the financing of political parties/campaign financing, election management bodies, and other civil society organisations working in the field of election observation. It is important to make sure that rather than duplicating efforts (for

example by monitoring the same types of media), civil society organisations try to create synergies and reach an agreement in advance of the monitoring.

For example, before the 2019 presidential and parliamentary election in Ukraine, five civil society organisations consisting of the Commission on Journalism Ethics, the Human Rights Platform, the Ukrainian Media and Communications Institute and StopFake formed a coalition to carry out the systematic pre-election monitoring of the media coverage. The activity was implemented with the support of two Council of Europe projects: “Strengthening freedom of media, access to information and reinforcing the public broadcasting system in Ukraine” and “Supporting the transparency, inclusiveness and integrity of electoral practice in Ukraine”, implemented under the Council of Europe Action Plan for Ukraine 2018-2021.

If it nevertheless happens that two or more civil society organisations conduct similar pre-election media monitoring projects, it is important to be aware of each other’s methodologies – particularly if there are differences in the monitoring periods, sampling, methods applied, etc. It is not a very big problem if there is more than one monitoring project but the overall gain could be undermined if two similar efforts arrived at dramatically different conclusions and results. Consequently, it is important to understand if there are differences in advance so that they can be explained.

It is obviously much better if civil society organisations agree to work together and handle different aspects of monitoring. For example, one organisation could focus on monitoring TV programmes and another on online media or social media networks. The co-ordination role could either be carried out by a donor, as was the case in Ukraine in 2019 when it was undertaken by the Council of Europe Office in Ukraine, or it could also be assumed by civil society organisations themselves.

At the outset of the monitoring project, it is recommended to organise meetings with all relevant stakeholders who are either involved in the election process or will in some way be involved in the monitoring. When meetings take place with media regulators, it is advisable to find out the scope and timeline of their planned election activities. It is good practice for a media regulator to establish systematic media monitoring during an election campaign as it assists it in identifying any inequitable and preferential coverage of contestants and in taking prompt corrective action. If the regulator does not have the resources or capacity to conduct pre-election media monitoring, co-operation with civil society organisations with experience in this area could be considered.

While the goals of the media monitoring exercise conducted by civil society organisations are different from those of a media regulator, the latter can still take such monitoring into consideration, particularly if it is carried out by respected and experienced organisations. The main goal of media monitoring by civil society organisation is to provide a professional, comprehensive and objective assessment of political diversity and balance in news and current affairs coverage by the media monitored. The main goal of the project is to inform the public about the conduct of the media during the elections, initiate a discussion about the objectivity and quality of the media reporting and promote the media’s adherence to international standards and best practices regarding freedom of expression and media independence.



General considerations before starting a media monitoring exercise

- ✓ *Are state media free to play an impartial, fair and objective role in covering the activities of all candidates and political parties or is there a selective approach to provide information on selected events where topics are chosen not for their information value but in order to portray a favoured party in a positive light and its opponents in a negative light. Is there any preferential treatment in favour of or against a candidate or political party?*
- ✓ *Is there any intentional manipulation of the privately-owned media by its owners or other partisan forces?*
- ✓ *Is anyone imposing direct censorship?*
- ✓ *Are journalists forced to adjust their comments or criticisms to what is considered acceptable by the authorities and/or are they engaged in self-censorship?*
- ✓ *Are any media and/or journalists penalised or harassed in any way for broadcasting programmes or publishing articles merely because they are critical of the government, its policies or the powers that be?*
- ✓ *Are journalists ready to “cross the line of objectivity” in return for money or other personal benefits – are they corrupt?*
- ✓ *Are journalists competent and responsible enough to have adequate resources before releasing any information?*
- ✓ *Is there any prejudice in reporting based on racial, ethnic and religious hatred?*



What are the objectives we want to achieve by conducting a domestic media monitoring project?

1. To provide the media, the political contestants, the international community and the citizens with benchmarks to judge the fairness of the election process.
2. To provide the voters with accurate information on whether the mass media are enabling them to gain a fair and balanced picture of the campaign; and alert them of the need to question their sources of information prior to an election.
3. To raise public awareness and encourage journalists, editors and media outlet owners to observe the standards of balanced reporting in the broadcast and print media focusing on specific important political issues.
4. To motivate citizens so that they learn how to view and accept information. For many citizens, this could be their first unique opportunity to finally better understand what should be the actual role of the media in a democratic and free society.
5. To advocate for positive changes to the media laws so that public media become independent and reporting is balanced.
6. To document and raise public awareness about all cases of administrative restrictions, intimidation and harassment of the media by the state authorities or a political party.

Another objective of monitoring media coverage could be to evaluate media compliance with international standards and recommendations concerning good practices. As mentioned above, the mechanism of co-operation among national stakeholders could enhance the transparency and integrity of the electoral environment and prevent and counteract possible electoral violations in the media. Such monitoring could also be important from the media literacy point of view and there should be further activities in the run-up to elections explaining how easily people could become targets of manipulation. The media monitoring results could also be used to update existing ethical rules, such as the media code of conduct.

It is clear that the role of civil society organisations monitoring media may not be limited to elections but could also focus on pre-election and post-election phases. It is also important to reach out to international election observers who normally undertake their own media monitoring work. While international observers are limited by their remits and are not able to use the media monitoring results of a local civil society organisation, they are nevertheless

interested to meet the local players and have an understanding of existing media monitoring projects.

Consequently, international observers could support domestic players in playing a more active role when it comes to advocating the implementation of recommendations contained in reports by international observers. As international observers leave the country after elections, domestic media monitors are well placed to advocate important changes and recommendations. For this to be successful, it is important to create synergy between international observers and domestic media monitoring groups. This synergy is important given the existing stereotypes on both sides – international observers tend to consider some domestic media monitors biased and unprofessional while domestic media monitors consider some international observers unable to fully understand the complexities of their local elections and media environment.

It is important that only domestic media monitors with a proven record of independent and genuine monitoring are involved in this type of activity. In addition, domestic media monitors should strengthen their abilities to work more professionally and make sure that their independence is not questioned. This includes both their monitoring activities and reporting. Bringing the reports into line with international standards will make them stronger.

Civil society organisations are taken more seriously when they demonstrate their ability to work jointly on communicating their findings on various aspects of their observation. It is only through greater professionalisation and trust in domestic observation groups that they could be more successful in advocating important policy changes and reforms after elections. The Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation states that organisations engaging in election observation “*should offer recommendations for improving electoral and political processes*”. Accordingly, recommendations contained in final reports – of both international and domestic observers – can provide a basis for post-election advocacy efforts.

It is also recommended that civil society organisations try to co-ordinate their efforts with international organisations involved in post-election work as both Council of Europe and OSCE also organise post-election roundtables and other events to discuss their final reports. Civil society organisations could use these events to identify common ground for advocating recommendations, along with international observers.

This process can begin right after elections – with civil society organisations organising round tables with the participation of all relevant stakeholders – including international observers – to discuss recommendations to improve the electoral process. The recommendations should be to the point and implementable, so it is important that these organisations set realistic and achievable targets for their advocacy campaigns, taking into account existing resources as well as opportunities to raise additional funds. Creating coalitions helps in achieving these tasks. The Council of Europe and OSCE permanent missions (in the respective countries) can play a more active role in discussing follow up and advocacy efforts with civil society organisations. These organisations have often benefited from sharing their experiences with other bodies, particularly from discussions with those

facing the same challenges. It is not necessary to “reinvent the wheel” but lessons can be learned from other groups and mistakes avoided.



Making an impact with monitoring: How to use the results to advocate for improvements and changes

We live in a world where misinformation and disinformation are becoming frequent and omnipresent and where people do not know whom to trust. The main aim of propaganda is to sow doubt, distort truths, paralyse the decision-making process and undermine democratic values, human rights and the rule of law. Its goal is also to eradicate activism, which is why civil society should fight back. It is important that civil society identifies and raises awareness about deliberately false news stories, disinformation and propaganda through continuous fact checking and media monitoring projects that provide important feedback to people on the fundamental nature of the propaganda.

It is incumbent upon professional journalists to demonstrate responsibility to the public by providing credible and comprehensive newsworthy reporting. The journalistic standards and values that the media should represent are crucial in this era of misinformation and disinformation.

The current crisis of confidence in the traditional concept of media is an opportunity to reinforce the role and mission of professional journalism. High-quality, credible and trustworthy information is a cornerstone of a strong democracy. In order to uphold these values and enhance the trust in them, media should focus more on fact checking, in-depth reporting and investigative journalism. Any steps we take to address the current challenges before the news industry should put the professional journalism first and foremost and not undermine that commitment. It is important for people to understand the danger of mis/disinformation and propaganda on the internet, which is why measures to promote professional journalism and digital literacy should be taken. Media monitoring should become a strong and continuous process, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in order to provide feedback to the sector and foster standards of journalism. Media monitoring could be very helpful as a way of ensuring fact- and research-based advocacy for better standards.

It is important to have a clear plan on how to use the monitoring results to advocate improvements and changes in the process. A good approach is to inform the monitored media at the beginning of the project of the intention to monitor them. If it is clear that there is a clear absence of an independent regulatory body able to properly oversee the media coverage of elections, consideration could even be given to establishing a media code of

conduct by which the media would voluntarily sign up to self-regulatory obligations. The implementation of the code would then be monitored. Even if a code is not drawn up, it makes sense to meet the monitored media and explain the main objectives of the exercise. The main idea behind the monitoring project is not to name and shame but, rather, initiate discussion about professional standards and provide important feedback to voters about the type of information they receive. It also constitutes feedback to journalists on their work.

From the outset, it is important to have a project calendar with an agreed timeline for publishing the monitoring findings. When the project is conducted for the first time, it is advisable to consider holding press conferences, particularly at the beginning. This would allow project implementers to properly explain the monitoring methodology and answer any questions about what the public needs to know about the project. The more the project resonates in the public mind, the greater the potential pressure is on the media to live up to their legal obligations and standards of professional journalism. After each press conference, it is also important to draw up a mailing list consisting of media, contestants, international observers, the diplomatic community and other relevant stakeholders, who should all receive monitoring reports. Apart from interim monitoring reports, a preliminary report should be published shortly before election day (before the moratorium) summarising the entire campaign and providing preliminary conclusions about the media coverage.



POST-ELECTION FOLLOW-UP

Immediately after the elections, project implementers could consider organising a workshop or roundtable with the participation of all relevant stakeholders, including the media regulator, the election management body, (newly elected) members of parliament and monitored media to discuss the project findings and improvements to be implemented before the next elections. This type of event provides a good opportunity to publish the final report, which should include recommendations for legal and systematic changes in the election and media-related legislation. As mentioned above, co-operation in this respect could be envisioned with international observers (if they are still in the country) or by adopting their reports and recommendations – in case the findings and recommendations coincide. The main objective of the roundtable should be to reflect on the conduct of the media in the election campaign and discuss standards and best practices regarding the media coverage of elections and their practical implementation in the country concerned. The discussion could focus on recommendations to enhance the media coverage of elections to bring it fully into line with international standards and best practices. The following questions could be raised in the course of the event.



General questions

- ✓ *Did the media fulfil their role to inform voters in an objective and accurate manner with regard to the platforms and views of different candidates and parties?*
- ✓ *Coverage of state authorities – was the line between official activities and campaign-related appearances of state officials blurred?*
- ✓ *Was the election-related coverage determined by newsworthiness or by political considerations – who determined the editorial policy?*
- ✓ *Did the media provide in-depth and analytical coverage of election platforms?*
- ✓ *Did the media facilitate vibrant political discussions? Comparison with previous election campaigns – improvement or deterioration?*



Media regulation

- ✓ *The role of a media regulator during elections. How to provide a timely and effective remedy in the case of unbalanced coverage.*
- ✓ *Dealing with media-related complaints – how to ensure a timely and effective remedy in the adjudication of complaints.*
- ✓ *Applying sanctions – how to ensure that sanctions are commensurate with the nature and gravity of the violation.*
- ✓ *How to find the right balance between regulation and editorial freedoms.*
- ✓ *Should a regulator and/or commission conduct its own media monitoring?*

Recommendation



Improvements and recommendations

- ✓ *What should be done to improve the media coverage of the next elections?*
- ✓ *How to ensure media independence and non-interference in their work by political and economic interests.*
- ✓ *Changes to legislation and regulatory practice?*
- ✓ *Short-term and longer-term recommendations for improvements and changes.*

Appendix 1. Media monitoring matrix



Type of monitoring

It is important to determine the type of monitoring which will be conducted based on the type of elections taking place as well as other important factors (financial and human resources, monitoring period, number of reports etc)

Sampling and unit of analysis

While it is generally possible to monitor the entire 24-hour period of media broadcasts, for the purpose of analysing the election coverage of the media, it is enough to focus on selected segments of the media coverage (broadcasts, newspaper articles or specific sections of websites).

Monitored subjects

The list of subjects for monitoring should be defined prior to the launch of the activity. Relevant entities are only those that can be clearly identified as particular political parties or groupings. Sometimes certain political terms (for instance, "opposition" or "authorities"), which are commonly used in political communication, are frequently employed in the media. However, they should be included in the list of relevant subjects when these terms are not used vaguely, but represent concrete political forces recognised as such in society.

Type of programmes

When deciding the type of programmes to monitor, The focus should primarily be on all the programmes aired during prime time, i.e. the time when the broadcasts usually have their largest audience (for instance six hours of evening broadcasts from 6pm to midnight). Important political programmes or special election programmes could, of course, also be recorded and analysed if aired outside the generally perceived prime time (for example, for radio, prime time often also includes the morning programmes).

Quantitative analysis

Quantitative analysis includes a number of numeric measures and indicators (variables) that can be counted and analysed, including assessing and producing findings regarding the time allocated to each monitored entity, topics, top stories and geographical area of coverage and also evaluating the tone of the coverage in which these subjects were portrayed – positive, neutral or negative. In addition, the monitoring can focus on the structure of news programmes in terms of their thematic diversity, geographical coverage and top stories in the monitoring period, as well as the duration of news items

Qualitative analysis

Qualitative analysis evaluates the performance of selected media outlets against ethical and professional standards, such as balance, accuracy, timely, choice of issues, omission of information, advantage of incumbency, positioning of items, inflammatory language that cannot be easily quantified. These data are reported separately and integrated into the comments and conclusions of the narrative reports.

Data collection

Monitors complete an electronic data entry form which is available on the computers they use to also conduct the monitoring.

Data entry and analysis

The last phase of working with data is data processing. Since the monitoring forms consist of a relatively small number of different data types and the data can be easily organised according to the given criteria, Microsoft Excel is suitable for processing the results of the monitoring process. The data acquired during the monitoring consist of subject/affiliation, time (direct, indirect and total), evaluation, item start, item end, topic and its time.

Interpretation of the data and reporting

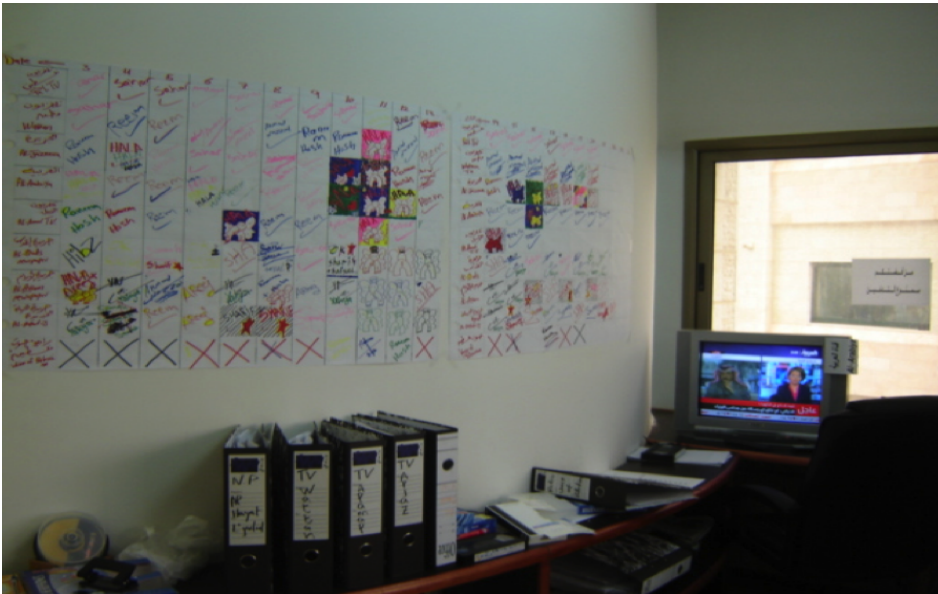
It is important to make sure that people experienced with media monitoring carry out the data analysis, create tables and charts and write monitoring reports. It should be clear before each exercise how many reports will be published along with the precise timeline.

Appendix 2. Useful tips for a media monitoring project

Media monitoring project calendar

Taking into consideration the project goal and financial and human resources, it is important to develop a project timeline, including the precise dates when the monitoring will commence, when the reports will be published, and the end date of the monitoring.

The interpretation of numeric data needs to be done carefully, taking into account not only the data contained in statistical tables, but also possible reasons for the values reported in them. It is always important to explain the main trends in the media monitoring and support each of them with one or more concrete examples. The media analyst needs to describe a phenomenon, in this case media performance, but he or she also needs to be able to explain it. There is no general model for interpreting data. What follows are some simple indications that can improve the reading of data and make it easier to analyse them.



The picture shows a project calendar covering the entire monitoring period, elections in Palestine 2006.

Summary of monitoring tips

It is always important to understand clearly what the main objectives of the monitoring are and to correlate them with the available resources, both human and financial. Once it is clear what the objectives are, it is important to set the unit of analysis. It could be 1 pixel or it could also be one article, depending on how detailed the monitoring results we expect are. It is important to be aware of the shortcomings and strengths of different methodological approaches and to properly communicate the methodology to monitors/analysts.

It is important to use all relevant variables (time, tone, direct/indirect and others) when carrying out the analysis – do not reach conclusions by looking at them separately.

It is crucial to frequently test the validity of the media monitoring data and to test the reliability of monitors.

Bear in mind the need to think how a TV programme influences an average voter and do not speculate how it affects specific party supporters –common sense is required.

Remember that the tone of the coverage is positive if the way the message is presented and the nature of the message are both positive, similarly if both the factors are negative, the tone is negative. A neutral tone is the result of both factors being neutral. If the way the message is presented and the context of the message do not match, then monitors have to determine the tone according to what is the prevailing factor (so it could be either the content of the story or the context).

Balanced news coverage means that a media outlet attempts to cover events in a balanced, fair and objective manner by offering time or space to all subjects in the context of an item to present their views. Such a news item is purely informative and does not contain any one-sided evaluating standpoints or criticism.

Media should not be afraid to describe reality as it is and to present people's emotions and positive or critical/negative viewpoints. Neutrality should not be seen as an ultimate goal as people are not interested in watching superficial and sterile news. Media should present all sides of a story with comparable time and manner of presentation to avoid any preference or bias.

It is important to keep in mind that it is the behaviour of media outlets that is being assessed, not the subjects monitored.

It is important to remember that there is no expectation that the news should be neutral.

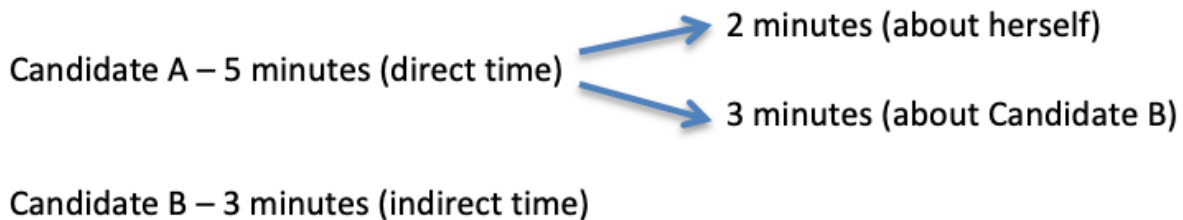
The mere existence of positive or negative ratings attributed to monitored subjects does not yet indicate bias – providing that the respective media outlets treat all monitored subjects in a similar manner. If however, there is a visible longer-term tendency to always report on some subjects in a positive manner and to criticise others, this could indicate bias.

For the quantitative analysis, we avoid including subjects which are too general and vague – they should represent concrete political forces recognised in society.

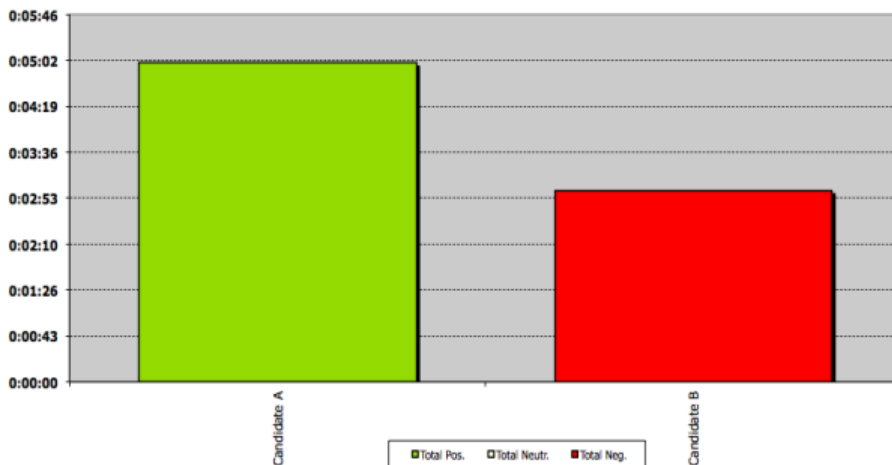
Example of how to calculate time in the quantitative analysis

Time

Candidate A speaks for 5 minutes. Of this time, she speaks for 3 minutes about her election rival, Candidate B. She describes her opponent as a politician who has lied to his voters in the past and who makes promises but never delivers on them. Candidate A uses the rest of the time – 2 minutes – to speak about her platform, saying that she is the one who will deliver. Let us see how this example should be processed



It is important to include both the time for Candidate A, who spoke directly, as well as



the time for Candidate B, who was mentioned.

For example, the Slovak media monitoring organisation MEMO 98 uses the following five-level scale evaluation: Grades 1 and 2 mean that a given monitored subject is presented in a very positive or positive light respectively; in both instances the news coverage is favourable. Grade 3 is a “neutral mark”, with the coverage being solely factual, without positive or negative connotations. Grades 4 or 5 signify that a subject was presented in a negative or very negative light, respectively. Such coverage has negative connotations, including accusations or one-sided criticism regarding a subject portrayed in an item or story. It is always important to consider the actual evaluation (judgment) of the subject being monitored and also the context of the story or item.

Examples of a positive evaluation of the selected subject would be: *subject A* is a very popular member of parliament; people like *subject A*; he/she is a respected politician. Examples of a negative evaluation would be: *subject B* is a political loser; he/she is not an honest politician. If there is no positive or negative evaluation, the message is rated as neutral, for example when the report says: *subject C* is a candidate in the upcoming elections.

For the assessment of the tone, a monitor considers the context in which the information is reported (this entails the background of the story, how it is reported by a journalist or news presenter, the intonation of his/her voice, background music, pictures, a happy or angry crowd, people applauding or shouting derogatory words, etc). The second parameter to consider when carrying out the assessment of the tone is the content – is the reported information positive, neutral or negative in connection with the subject being monitored? For example, the fact that *subject A* has negotiated an agreement whereby the country will receive financial aid, or the fact that the unemployment rate in the country will be reduced by a new law proposed by *subject A* (member of parliament) is perceived by the majority of society as a rather positive development. On the other hand, inherently negative stories could feature. For instance, there might be a report on *subject B*, a minister whose car injured a pedestrian because he did not keep to the speed limit. The fact that: *subject C* participated in a sitting of parliament is neutral.

Accordingly, monitors consider how the story is reported (context) and the actual content of the story – does it shed a positive, negative or neutral light on the monitored subject. When both content and context are positive, the monitor's final evaluation will be positive; when they are both negative, it will be negative.

It is a little more challenging to determine the overall tone if there is a difference between content and context. For example, the context of the story is neutral – a factual report on *subject A* having been detained in connection with a traffic accident. However, the content is negative as the mere fact that someone is detained is negative. In such a situation, the monitors have to establish what the determining factor is (the content or context).

This may be compared to a media report that the incumbent president met with a president of another country and signed an agreement thanks to which a big financial investment will be coming into the country in the next three years. The context of the story is again neutral, but the content of the information is positive for the president as details of achievements, progress, improvements and successes always have positive connotations. Here again, monitors have to determine what is the final assessment – in the first example, the overall assessment will most likely be negative, whereas in the second it will be positive.