

NATIONAL MEDIA COMMISSION

GUIDELINES FOR  
POLITICAL REPORTING


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## FOREWORD

One of the strengths of the Ghanaian Constitution is the prominence given to the media. The focus on media tends to suggest the vital role of the media if Ghana's cherished goal of freedom and justice is to be actualised. At the centre of Ghana's efforts to promote free and responsible media is the National Media Commission.

Ghana's constitution sets high standards for the media especially when it comes to political reporting in general, and elections in particular. The essence of the provisions is to ensure fairness. These constitutional obligations need to be operationalised and translated into action. This calls for an elaboration of the core principles and this is where one finds the initiative of the National Media Commission in coming up with such a publication most useful.

Whereas it is true that fair political reporting is at all times a major concern of the body politic, the fact that 2000 is an election year reinforces the anxiety of political parties, civil society and the electorate for more balanced and informative reportage.

The Friedrich Ebert Foundation finds this publication as having the potential to contribute to a more conducive environment for multi-party politics and is therefore happy to be associated with it.

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The publication should not only help educate media practitioners and other stakeholders, but also provide an objective yardstick in assessing performance of practitioners and in the adjudication of complaints against media practitioners.

We hope media practitioners, political party activists, academia and all other media stakeholders will find the publication useful.

Peter Schellschmidt  
Resident Director, Ghana  
Friedrich Ebert Foundation  
12th April, 2000

## PREFACE

The national Media Commission in 1996 published its Guidelines for Political Reporting. However, due to internal problems and technical reasons, the Commission could not measure the effectiveness of the Guidelines against the coverage of the political process in that year's Presidential and Parliamentary elections.

In 1999 however, after series of seminars and workshops with stakeholders, it was felt necessary to review the document.

The Commission with support from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, organised a workshop for media practitioners and political party activists, the recommendation of which informed the Commission to carry out the review.

The revised Guidelines have thus been published to inform the media and the political parties on what to do to promote and facilitate free and responsible media to contribute to democratic governance in the country.

The Commission is greatly indebted to all those who offered views for this edition and to the Friedrich Ebert Foundation for its sustained interest.

**Tim Acquah-Hayford**  
**Chairman**

## INTRODUCTION

The Constitution which is the fundamental law of the land assigns certain roles to a number of institutions to promote a democratic culture in Ghana. Two of the most important of these institutions are the media and, in the light of the fact that ours is a multi-party democracy, the political parties.

Political parties give meaning to the citizens right to freedom of association; they are groupings of people of like mind, generally with identifiable political objective, coming together to canvass their points of view. Together with other institutions, they are enjoined not to preach doctrines and perform acts that will undermine or jeopardise the national desire for development through democracy. On the contrary, they are required to actively promote and protect democracy.

The media are expected to perform two very crucial roles:

1. To provide fair, accurate and comprehensive information to enable citizens make intelligent political (economic, social cultural etc.) decisions; and
  2. To give fair and adequate opportunity for citizens to express their divergent views.
- (Article 163)**

This means that within their limited resources, the media must not only provide the

information raw materials for citizens decision-making, but also create opportunities for all citizens to express themselves freely within the law.

It is clear that in fashioning the role for the media, the framers of the Constitution took careful note of the aspirations and needs of the people of Ghana which they have sought, in Chapter 12, to convey to the media practitioners: that is important to our people who get into the seat of power — that is, who run their affairs — and how they perform when they get the power.

Media practitioners are normally required at all times to publish truthful, unbiased information. This becomes doubly important in the competing tension-strewn world of politics. The Constitution attempts to assure the provision of every opportunity to the public to scrutinise candidates offered by political parties for election as well as the political agenda of these parties for the governance of the country, by making these two important media functions mandatory. Constitutional provisions seek to ensure that the media give wide coverage to political activity and do so in the most professional manner possible. This is expected not to be limited to the period of elections only; the media must at all times, give the public the opportunity to make elections and the entire process of democratic governance meaningful.

The same Chapter 12 created the 18 member National Media Commission, to be the guide, mediator and watchdog of the media. It is the Commission's clear constitutional responsibility to protect the media from any interference while ensuring that it does not, itself, interfere in the professional functions of the media. And at the same time, the Constitution also mandates the Commission to ensure that the media grow, perform and progress responsibly. (Article 167 (6) ). Thus, it is the Commission's clear responsibility to ensure that every effort is made by the media to raise the practice of the profession to the highest level obtaining anywhere.

In the light of, in particular, this last responsibility, these guidelines are offered to the media. It is to be regarded as a guide to help in avoiding the pitfalls that dot the landscape of media practice.

These guidelines are the product of consultations with the media as well as individuals from various backgrounds and disciplines. The tone and the thrust are hortatory rather than compelling in line with the Commission's belief in the use of persuasion as opposed to compulsion to get the best out of our media.

Flowing from that, the Commission believes that practitioners will appreciate the importance and the need to operate in such a manner that will win them the sustainable true

respect and an enduring admiration of the public at large.

It is in this spirit that the Commission commends this guide to practitioners and the public alike.

## **SECTION A**

## **1. AIMS OF POLITICAL COVERAGE**

- 1.1 Coverage of political activities must include the aim of collecting and disseminating truthful, unbiased information on political parties and their activities to the public.
- 1.2 This means that the practitioners must seek to provide the public with information that would enable the electorate to make intelligent choices during elections.
- 1.3 It calls for practitioners to ensure that coverage is comprehensive and fair to all and that the information gathered is presented as objectively and impartially as possible.

## **2. COVERING CAMPAIGNS AND POLITICS GENERALLY**

- 2.1 Both during election campaigns and in the day-to-day coverage of political activity, practitioners must arm themselves with a good grounding in the political history of this country. This will enable them to understand the alignments (actual or perceived) that inform political activity in Ghana and help them to identify and properly place the locus of power at both national and local levels.

## **3. CANDIDATES FOR PUBLIC OFFICE**

- 3.1 It is the duty of the media to help the electorate to assess the candidates to make elections meaningful. This duty requires them to provide accurate information about candidates.

## **4. IMPORTANCE OF DISCUSSING THE ISSUES.**

- 4.1 The electorate must be given every opportunity to discuss and understand the issues.
- 4.2 Thus, apart from providing information about the candidates, media practitioners should balance discussions of personalities with analysis of the issues.

## **5. PARTY MANIFESTOS**

- 5.1 The media must do their utmost to make the parties manifestos intelligible to the electorate by subjecting them to objective analysis.

## **6. PROVIDING ACCESS**

- 6.1 The public must be given access to the range of opinions and views held by the political and other legitimate groups as indicated in Article 163:



***All state owned media shall afford fair opportunities and facilities for the presentation of divergent views and dissenting opinions.***

The private media have a special responsibility to also afford fair opportunities and facilities for the presentation of divergent views and dissenting opinions. This constitutional provision requires, among others, that regular conferences and congresses and the press conferences of the parties must be covered equally and fairly by the media

6.2 Other relevant provisions are:

**Article 55 (11)**

***The state shall provide fair opportunity to all political parties to present their programmes to the public by ensuring equal access to the state-owned media.***

**Article 55 (12)**

***All presidential candidates shall be given the same amount of time and space on the state-owned media to present their programmes to the people.***

**7. AVOIDING CONFLICT**

7.1 Views that promote violent conflict, especially political, social, cultural, racial religious and ethnic should not be encouraged.

**8. PARTY POLITICAL CAMPAIGN BROADCASTS**

8.1 Apart from the normal coverage of party political activities, including campaigns, there should be at least one party political broadcast for each registered party during the last month of the campaign.

8.2 Terms and conditions of the broadcast shall be the same for all parties.

8.3 The division and allocation of time within the allotted slot will be by the parties themselves in consultation with the media houses under the auspices of the National Media Commission.

**9. POLITICAL ADVERTISING.**

9.1 Where there is competition for limited advertising time or space, fair practices as enjoined by the Constitution. (Article 55 (11), (12), and (163) ) should be applied.

## SECTION B

### 10. POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT OF MEDIA PERSONNEL

- 10.1 Media practitioners must avoid activities that may compromise their integrity as journalists or damage their credibility, in order to be effective in the discharge of their duties.
- 10.2 Media practitioners, irrespective of political party affiliations and beliefs shall remain impartial in their dealings with political parties and in particular, shall be guided by the Code of Ethics of the Ghana Journalists Association.

### 11. ENDORSEMENT OF CANDIDATES

- 11.1 The state-owned media should, under no circumstances endorse candidates for political office. Personal preferences by individuals in the state-owned media of candidates, positions etc. must also not be permitted to spill over into news reports.

## SECTION C

### 12. FULL COVERAGE OF ELECTION PROCESS

- 12.1 Media houses must not limit their political coverage to just campaigns. Coverage should be extended to encompass all phases up to and including the declaration of the results.
- 12.2 As far as possible, the media shall endeavour to provide coverage at all levels of the political campaigning from the constituency to the national.
- 12.3 There will be the need for media practitioners to distinguish between the government and party activities in their reportage.

### 13. ACCESS OF INCUMBENT DURING CAMPAIGN PERIOD.

- 13.1 Presentation of government activities during elections should be weighed carefully to ensure that the incumbent government does not gain unfair access to the media. Bona fide news should be covered without giving the impression of bias.

### 14. BRIBES AND OTHER INDUCEMENTS

- 14.1 Media practitioners must avoid all actions that could compromise their own integrity or issue of judgement or the reputation of their organisation by, for example, refusing to accept bribes or other inducements.

## **SECTION D**

### **15. RESPECTING OTHERS' RIGHTS**

- 15.1 Media practitioners must, as far as possible, avoid infringing others' rights by, for instance, checking their facts correctly, and eschewing merely or gratuitously malicious, scandalous or defamatory publications.

### **16. USING PARTY RELEASES**

- 16.1 Journalists should not solely depend on handouts in view of the possibility of their promoting 'conduit journalism' which is clearly not satisfactory. 'Conduit Journalism' is the passing through of news without filtration, refinement or editing of any kind.

## SECTION E

### 17. MISCELLANEOUS MATTERS

- 17.1 The media are enjoined to beware of exploitation and avoid unwitting advertisement for self-seekers.
- 17.2 All quotations, especially when they are politically controversial or are defamatory in language and terms, for example, jargons, technical abbreviations and political euphemisms not clearly or easily understandable, require to be verified and fully explained.
- 17.3 Controversial or offensive references to opponents must be avoided, if at all possible, unless there is a clear justification, and also are defensible in a court of law.
- 17.4 The deliberate presentation of scenes, episodes, facts, that are meant to excite passion, hatred, contempt and prejudice must not be entertained.
- 17.5 The media must, as far as possible, respect legitimate police order to clear away from a particular scene. (Police and other accredited security agents have security duties to perform, for instance, protecting certain categories of officials and public property that might be endangered by refusal to obey such orders.) The police should also, as far as possible, respect the

constitutional responsibility of media practitioners to the general public at all times. There should be mutual understanding to avoid conflict in the interest of the public.

## SECTION F



**18. RESPONSIBILITIES OF POLITICAL PARTIES.**

- 18.1 All statements, press releases and other forms of information for publication in the media must be signed by a representation duly identified to the media beforehand.
- 18.2 Parties must be sure to give all media houses adequate notice, at least 48 hours, of impending political party activity to allow for proper and adequate logistics arrangements.
- 18.3 Parties should clean their statements and releases of insulting language that could lead to public unrest or breach of peace. This, hopefully, will ensure that the media practitioners are not compelled by professional imperatives to edit out undignified or intemperate language - which they have the right to do - and thereby, offend parties.
- 18.4 There should be a clearly defined public relations or press relations department from where the media can obtain necessary information without difficulty.
- 18.5 Political parties are reminded that press conferences are not political rallies and are therefore restricted to the press only.

- 18.6 It is the responsibility of parties to assure the safety of media practitioners covering their assignments from their own supporters and, as far as possible, from other would-be molesters.
- 18.7 Parties must refrain from attempting to suborn news reporters through the offer of money and other such considerations.