
6 Conclusion

From the outset and throughout the arguments in this book, the central role of the media in the democratic arena has been established and re-emphasised. Free expression – bringing news, publishing, disseminating or merely sharing it without interference or other barriers – is a fundamental human right. Therefore the media has a great role to play, and an even greater responsibility to bear.

As argued in the *Handbook for European Union Election Observation* (2008, p. 54), freedom of expression is an integral part of a democracy. Regional organisations such as the African Union, the Caribbean Community, the European Union, the Pacific Islands Forum and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations all advocate a place for freedom of expression, and it is already guaranteed in the laws of most developing countries. The next step for the developing countries is to ensure that these guarantees are actually enforced and respected.

The testimonies of individual journalists and reports from Commonwealth Observer Groups reinforce the challenges (and opportunities) faced by the media in covering elections. A strand in common is that they see the media to be the ‘eyes and ears’ of the community – to the extent that freedom of the media is critical to whether or not observers declare an election to be credible.

To reiterate, *The Danish Democracy Canon* argument demands that people be informed of what is happening in their surroundings, that they make up their minds on how they will benefit from and improve the community, and that the communities find the best-placed person amongst them to further those interests. These dynamics can only be met if the media is fulfilling its role as a professional and independent conveyor of news.

In 2005, the Commonwealth Press Union (CPU) said:

Elections are a key area where the print media can help civil society understand its rights. These are about making choices, providing a direct say in the way a country is run and affirming the involvement of every member of the electorate in the democratic process. Such choices cannot be made unless the electorate has sufficient knowledge of the issues and personalities involved, and an understanding of the situation in which the country finds itself. For the

press to help in the process requires professional, responsible, unbiased people-centred journalism. The dissemination of such information is a key task of the press in any democracy, and one that assumes greater importance in emerging democracies where the concept of simply casting a vote can be a novel experience. The implications of voting have also to be explained in an accessible and user-friendly way'.⁵³

To fulfil this mandate, the media should:

- Live by the standards and codes of its profession, negotiated amongst themselves and, where possible, negotiated with regulators. This must include banishing the practices of: taking 'transport money' or 'brown envelopes' – synonyms for bribery – from political players; writing about events in a biased way; or undertaking work for a political party of a politician (for whatever gain, including financial).
- Understand the legal environment in which they operate. The media should know the legal framework that governs the elections it is covering, and should be able to interpret these quickly if required.
- Ensure that its own place in society is guaranteed by legislation and campaign against any actions that may limit its work.
- Follow technological change and innovation closely, because changing technologies offer both challenges and opportunities for the media. Only the technologically savvy can expect to reap the full fruits of innovation. The tools a news reporter used to cover elections in 1991 have been completely transformed in less than two decades, and these are evolving rapidly. Taking advantage could reduce costs and lead to better access. This point is reinforced by Jacky Sutton, who says (in the context of Iraq) that new media can dilute the influence of partisan 'old media' institutions. Across the region, developments in information technology have meant that communication tools are in the hands of increasingly heterogeneous constituencies, so have expanded the public space. This has undermined monopoly by the elite of the flow of information and has created an expectation of public dissent, necessary for any meaningful pluralist politics.⁵⁴

- Be brave enough to take on the challenges required to safeguard democracy, but also understand that no story is big enough to die for.

Lastly, we conclude by reaffirming the guidelines drawn by the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association for the Commonwealth Secretariat:

- Establish a specialist Elections Unit (even if it comprises just one individual)
- Train your election team and ensure that an experienced senior journalist leads your team; and finally
- Establish an overall election programme plan: what programmes will be produced? What formats will be used? What rules will apply to programmes involving rival candidates? How will the programmes help to promote democracy? How will the issues be explained? Communicate this plan to the electoral body, to the politicians and to the audience.