

CAMPAIGN AND ELECTION REPORTING

By Robert Andresen

Bob Andresen is a veteran broadcast news producer, anchor and reporter, as well as an experienced educator and consultant. He spent 40 years in American radio and television, including 12 years as an anchor, writer and documentary producer at the American Forces Network, Europe, seven years as a writer and producer at CBS Chicago, three years as Managing Editor of KYW-TV in Philadelphia, and five years as Morning Editor at all-news WMAQ-AM in Chicago.

His experience as an educator includes adjunct professorships at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Loyola University, Columbia College and the University of Illinois.

Bob has been involved in training and consulting projects in Nigeria, the Republic of Georgia, Romania, Moldova and the Maldives.



- Introduction

In mature democracies, broadcast news coverage of politics, political parties, candidates, campaigns and elections has evolved over the span of many years into a simple and familiar pattern that fits the needs of the society and the political system. For emerging democracies, on the other hand, there often is little or no history of unbiased news coverage of political activity, meaning that broadcast journalists must learn the techniques of fair and impartial reporting virtually from scratch. They face a large gap between the need for unbiased news reporting, and their knowledge of how to fill that need. This book attempts to bridge that gap by presenting a series of simple rules, guidelines and suggestions for broadcast news coverage of political campaigns and elections.

- Avoiding the appearance of bias

Political campaigns and elections are some of the most difficult stories for broadcast journalists to cover. Emotions often run high, and journalists must struggle to cover a wide range of political events in a manner that is perceived to be fair, impartial and unbiased. Because they and their work are subjected to intense scrutiny during periods of heightened political activity, journalists should make sure their personal lives are free of activities which might embarrass them or their news organization. To avoid these problems, most responsible journalists decline to join any political party or politically-active organization. They believe that one of the sacrifices they must make on behalf of their profession is their right to membership in political parties or movements. Journalists who are publicly identified as members of politically-active organizations are automatically perceived as advocates for those organizations, and their work, rightly or wrongly, can be characterized as biased and unfair. News managers should encourage all anchors and reporters to remain independent, and avoid membership in any organization which actively participates in the political process.

- Political reporting in non-campaign periods

Prior to a legislative or executive election, the government will designate a formal period of time during which campaigning takes place. This campaign period often is governed by strict government rules and regulations about the granting of equal air time, individuals' right of reply to political attacks, the timing and structure of broadcast debates among the candidates and the rights and responsibilities of news reporters and other broadcast journalists.

During non-campaign periods, journalists are bound only by their own ethical standards and codes of conduct, and the standards and practices followed by their broadcast organizations. These standards and codes often include guidelines for presenting opposing political views, offering the right of reply to political figures who are attacked by their opponents and seeking a fair balance in the amount of news coverage given to rival political parties and politically-active organizations. It is important for the journalistic community to maintain high standards of ethical behavior at all times, and to enforce those standards by exposing and condemning unethical journalistic practices whenever they appear.

- Coverage of internal party politics

Decisions about news coverage of internal party matters should be made on the basis of their newsworthiness. If one party enjoys internal harmony while another is divided by personal disputes and policy disagreements, the party in turmoil will, of course, receive more news coverage during the non-campaign period. While both of these hypothetical parties are likely to receive equal coverage during a campaign period, because of government rules and regulations, such balance is not required, or even desirable, during non-campaign periods.

- Coverage of party congresses and conventions

Political party congresses and conventions are newsworthy events, and should be covered by the broadcast media in the same way other such non-campaign-period events are covered. Again, if one party displays unity on policy issues or

its choice of candidates, it will normally not receive as much coverage as a party that is split into warring policy camps or rival candidate factions.

- “Direct access” events vs. routine news coverage of political events

During the campaign period, a clear line should be drawn between what are called “direct access” events involving a political party or candidate and party or candidate events that are simply covered as newsworthy items in regularly-scheduled newscasts. “Direct access” events are broadcast programs in which the party or candidate controls the editorial content. Examples might be a program during which a party introduces its parliamentary candidates, or a program in which a candidate for president reveals a proposal for a new national health care program. These programs are produced and edited by the party or candidate involved, with the broadcast entity merely providing the air time as a public service. Each party is offered the same amount of air time for these “direct access” programs, and they are measured according to the “equal time” rules in effect at the time of their broadcast.

“Direct access” programs should never be confused with political reporting during regularly-scheduled newscasts. If a party event or candidate event is deemed newsworthy, a broadcast reporter will be assigned to cover it, and the resulting report will be subjected to the usual journalistic producing and editing rules. In this case, the broadcast journalists retain editorial control of their coverage of the political event, and it is not subject to the “equal time” regulations. If the report is broadcast during an official campaign period, however, it will be counted as an “appearance” and be subject to the “equal appearances” regulations which require equal or nearly equal numbers of appearances of all candidates or parties in broadcast news coverage of the entire campaign.

- Broadcast debates

Joint broadcast appearances by political party representatives or candidates for office, commonly called “debates”, are clearly “direct access” events, and are subject to equal time regulations. Journalists who are invited to participate in these events, as members of a panel of questioners, must make sure that their

questions are phrased in a politically-neutral manner, and do not exhibit any bias for or against any candidate or party.

If a broadcast debate among officials of multiple parties is scheduled, journalists can guarantee fair questioning by having officials and supporters of one party question the representatives of another. Sponsors of the event simply issue an equal number of invitations to each party, seat those invited in separate, designated sections of the studio, and provide an opportunity for each group to question the representatives of another, in round-robin fashion.

The organizers of a broadcast debate must consult with the parties in advance, to make sure the event is not disrupted by the supporters of one side or another. If there is a chance that control of the broadcast might be usurped, the organizers should take steps to prevent such an eventuality. This might involve holding the debate in an empty studio, with no audience present, or even canceling the broadcast after it has begun.

- Party events vs. candidate events

When a candidate for president addresses a party rally, it is virtually impossible to categorize this either as a party event or a candidate event. For the most part, however, party political events can be distinguished from candidate political events, and it might be useful to do so in attempting to achieve balance in covering a political campaign. Generally, party events are those events in which more than one candidate is featured. Candidate events, obviously, feature only a single candidate.

- Government activity vs. political campaigning

It also can be very difficult, if not impossible, to draw a clear line between legitimate activities by government officials, and politically-motivated actions by those same officials, in their roles as candidates for re-election. A president who presides at an opening ceremony for a new government-built school might also be using the event to further his re-election ambitions. Journalists need to remind

their audiences that government officials often have more than one motive for their actions.

One way to judge the motives of a government official is on the basis of recent history. For example, if a president has exhibited a reluctance to appear in public over an extended period, but suddenly becomes available to his constituents in the last six months before standing for re-election, chances are his new-found availability is based on his political ambitions, and has little to do with his actions as chief executive. It is the responsibility of the journalist to remind the audience of the background of the president's actions, and not simply report them as legitimate government activity.

- "Embedded" reporters

The most effective and efficient way to cover a political campaign is to "embed" a full-time reporter in the campaign organization. The concept of "one candidate = one reporter" allows the reporter to develop contacts within the campaign organization, and establish a relationship of mutual trust with the candidate. This technique, however, carries with it the danger that the reporter will begin to identify with the candidate or the campaign staff, and that this will affect the reporter's work. This danger can be easily overcome by a regular schedule of reporter rotation among all of the candidates.

- Biased audio and video

One of the most subtle ways of allowing bias to creep into broadcast news reporting is by manipulation of the audio and video coverage of campaign events. Deliberately selecting unflattering camera angles or using audio clips that show the candidate in an unfavorable light are ways the reporter can influence the audience. Producers and editors must be constantly on the alert, to make sure that reporter bias, whether conscious or unconscious, does not creep into the coverage of the campaign.

- Reporting personal information

On occasion, journalists will learn details of the personal lives or behavior of the candidates which might have a bearing on the campaign. These so-called “character issues” sometimes have proven decisive, and reporters and editors must be prepared to deal with them. Some journalists believe that the public has a right to know every detail of the candidates’ personal lives, and that all behavior, no matter how private, is indicative of the character of the candidate, and thus is a legitimate issue for the voters to take into consideration when casting their ballots.

Most responsible journalists, however, recognize the right of a political candidate to have a private life. When they learn details of the candidate’s past or present behavior, they apply a simple guideline in deciding whether to report that behavior, namely: Does the private behavior affect the ability of the candidate to carry out the duties of his or her public office? If the answer to that question is yes, the journalist has a duty to report the private behavior. If the answer to that question is no, the private behavior should remain unreported.

- Third-party attacks

Political news reporting frequently involves reporting one candidate’s attacks on another. These “third-party” attacks should never be considered an attack by the reporter, and in fact many judicial agencies and panels have recognized that journalists cannot be held responsible for merely reporting what someone else has said. If a candidate attacks another candidate, it is the responsibility of the journalist to offer the target an opportunity to respond, and include both the attack and the response in the same report. This “right of reply” is a hallmark of mature and professional political reporting.

- Defining the issues

One of the most important roles of the broadcast journalist during the campaign period is as an “agenda-setter”, a person who helps define the issues and explain them to the electorate in understandable ways. The journalist must make certain

that the issues put forward are genuine concerns of a sizable segment of the electorate, and have solutions that can be reached through the democratic process.

In many cases, the issues in the campaign will be self-evident. They are the major issues facing the nation and the electorate, and the journalist must make certain that the candidates and parties are questioned closely about their policies in response to these issues. Other issues, however, are not so obvious, since they either affect only a portion of the electorate, or are not part of the current national debate. Journalists should pay attention to these issues as well, and not allow the campaign to proceed without a full airing of their impact on the society and the candidates and parties' responses to them.

- Voter panels

Journalists seeking to identify pertinent campaign issues should seek the views of as large a segment of the population as possible. One way to do this is by creating a voter panel early in the campaign process. This panel should include well-spoken representatives of the major demographic groups in the population, and should be convened in the presence of cameras and microphones on a regular basis before and during the campaign; perhaps as often as once a week. The members of the panel should be prepared to express the consensus opinions of their peer group, suggest issues they are most concerned about, and assess the performance of the candidates and parties in meeting their needs. Some obvious choices for inclusion in voter panels are educators, farmers, fishermen, small business owners, civil servants, homemakers, students, and service employees. All levels of the society should be represented in a voter panel, but it should not be made so large that it becomes cumbersome and unwieldy. A voter panel should consist of between five and ten members, chosen by the broadcast entity. Any panel members who are also members of politically-active organizations must be identified as such during each of their on-air appearances.

- Issues reporting

Broadcast journalists need to assist the voter in understanding the issues in the campaign, and provide benchmarks by which voters are able to judge the candidates' responses to those issues. One way to accomplish this is through a series of news reports that present the candidates views side by side. The technique involves framing an unbiased question on an issue of importance to the voters, presenting that question to each of the candidates, and giving them an appropriate length of time (one or two minutes) to present their responses. All of the responses then are edited together, back to back, and aired during one or more newscasts. In this way, the voters will be able to judge the candidates grasp of each of the issues, and compare their proposed solutions, in one place at one time.

- Voter education

Broadcast news organizations, especially state-run and public service radio and television operations, have an additional responsibility during campaign periods: the education of the public with regard to the mechanics of electoral campaigns and elections. In this regard, they should produce and broadcast a series of programs, news reports and/or public service announcements explaining how the elections work, and the role of the voter in the democratic process.

The radio and television news departments can take part in the voter education process by assigning reporters to produce a series of reports on the following topics:

- How elections are organized
- How candidates are selected
- How political parties operate
- Who is eligible to vote
- How to cast your ballot
- How the votes are counted
- How to report voting irregularities

- Pre-election polls

In an effort to enhance campaign coverage, and provide a snapshot of voter sentiment during the pre-election period, broadcast news organizations often conduct public opinion polls, and report the results of polls conducted by others. In reporting poll results, especially during the pre-election period, journalists must make certain the audience is given enough information to properly judge the accuracy of the poll, and the weight that should be given to the results. This means that each story reporting poll results should include the name of the poll's sponsor, the time period during which the poll was conducted, the number of respondents, how and why they were chosen and the poll's margin of error. The relative inaccuracy of pre-election polls has been demonstrated time and again, so the broadcast journalist should be extremely careful in reporting their results.

The reporting of pre-election poll numbers is frequently part of what has become known as "horse race" reporting. This type of political reporting ignores the issues, and concentrates exclusively on the results of the public opinion surveys, and discussing which candidates are ahead or behind in the polls. "Horse race" reporting is empty of meaning, and often uses up air time that could more valuably be spent in discussion of the issues and the candidates policy views.

- Reporting election results

Once the election is over, and all of the polling places have closed, broadcast news organizations should concentrate on reporting the results as rapidly and accurately as possible. Official vote tallies are notoriously slow in coming, but election commissions often will provide unofficial results within hours of the election. If possible, broadcast news organizations should establish their own unofficial vote-tallying machinery, perhaps as part of a news media pool. If that is not possible, reporters should be stationed at as many vote-counting facilities as possible, to report results as they come in. In reporting the election results, broadcast journalists must constantly remind the audience that the numbers of votes and percentages that they are being given are unofficial, and might vary significantly from the final, official tally.

One way of obtaining a rapid and often fantastically accurate picture of the results of an election is through the use of an “exit” poll. This polling technique involves surveying voters *after* they have cast their ballots. Research has shown that voters are reluctant to give information about their voting intentions *before* they have cast their ballots, but once they have in fact voted, they are quite willing to talk about who they actually voted for, and why. A carefully constructed “exit” poll, involving a statistically significant number of voters who represent a demographically accurate sample of the electorate can often indicate the results of an election within minutes of the time the polls close, with a margin of error of a mere fraction of one percent. Additionally, the demographic information embedded in the poll data can be extracted to indicate which groups voted for which candidate, and even which campaign issues were decisive.

Opponents of exit polling are quick to point out that many American broadcast news organizations inaccurately predicted the outcome of the 2000 presidential election, based on exit polling done by the Voter News Service, a consortium of news agencies. The problem was that only the first one or two “waves” of exit poll data were used, even though they were incomplete and geographically and demographically skewed. After all of the results of the VNS exit poll were tabulated and calibrated, it did, in fact, accurately reflect the actual vote count.

- Reporting allegations of election irregularities

While the election is underway, broadcast news organizations should be alert to indications of voting irregularities, and make sure they are reported to election officials. Many nations that have little or no experience with democratic processes are especially vulnerable to election rigging, and this is an important part of the story that must be reported. Often, the United Nations and other international organizations will dispatch election observers to monitor the conduct and results of an election. Broadcast news organizations should maintain close contact with international observer teams, and report the results of their investigations. Similarly, reporters should be assigned to cover the national election commission, and report any and all complaints that are filed regarding election irregularities.

In the field, reporters should be alert to unusual activities that might signal an attempt to unduly influence the casting and counting of the ballots. Some warning signs include unusual gatherings in or near the polling place, the temporary or permanent disappearance of ballot boxes, unusual contact between voters and other persons in the voting booth, mishandling of blank ballots and odd behavior on the part of local election judges and other officials. If reporters witness what they believe to be election irregularities, they should first make sure that the situation is reported to the proper authorities before they report it to the audience.

- Handling complaints of biased coverage

Broadcast news organizations should create a system to handle complaints from candidates and political parties that feel they have been unfairly treated. This system can be as simple as an “ombudsman” assigned to the news department, or as elaborate as a national news council, with the authority to order the broadcasting of corrections or compensatory news coverage. Whatever system is established, it is vital that the political parties and potential candidates be involved in the planning process, to give them a stake in the eventual outcome. Although the complaint system can handle disputes over campaign coverage, broadcast news organizations should be careful always to maintain their own internal editorial checks and balances, and not simply surrender editorial control to a third party. If a complaint is received, and it cannot be resolved through direct negotiation between the broadcast news organization and the aggrieved candidate or party, it should be referred to the outside agency. The parties must agree that the decision of the outside agency is final, and is not subject to appeal to any higher authority, or to the courts.

- Further information

This guide was prepared with information from a variety of sources, as well as the author’s personal experience. Journalists wishing to obtain more information about news coverage of political campaigns and elections in other countries can find a comprehensive list of sources on the Internet. A web search using the phrase “journalist code of conduct” will produce a list of codes from various

sources around the world, many of them sharply different in their emphasis on one issue or another, depending on the political and social system in effect in that particular country.

I welcome questions or comments regarding broadcast news coverage of political events. I can be reached at bobandrese@aol.com.