



**OBJECTIVE AND EFFECTIVE COVERAGE OF THE
ELECTORAL PROCESS:
PROBLEMS AND OBSTACLES**



May 2022



This research was conducted by the NGO “Investigative Journalists” in the framework of the “Early Elections 2021 – Domestic Observations and Citizens Empowerment by Civil Society” project implemented by OxyGen Foundation, Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly-Vanadzor, Union of Informed Citizens and Yerevan School of Political Studies. The project is funded by the European Union.

The research was conducted with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

Introduction

The right to free elections is guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights. The free expression of the citizen's will and the exercise of the right to vote is a fundamental democratic value against the abuse of political power. Free and transparent elections are the foundation of any democratic state.

Transparency and public oversight are a very important prerequisite for the entire electoral process and the normal course of the electoral system. Public oversight is possible only in case of free, impartial, and unbiased media coverage.

Hence, the availability of professional journalists armed with proper knowledge and skills is extremely important. The coverage of elections should be carried out properly in line with professional, legislative, and ethical norms of journalists.

It is only verified, reliable, free from false news information provision that promotes conscious choice, voter awareness, and non-manipulation by various political forces.

In the recent period, the electoral processes have been accompanied by rhetoric of hatred and hostility.¹ Media and social websites are flooded with similar content, negatively affecting the public perceptions, political processes, and elections proper. The rhetoric of hatred and hostility is accumulated inside the political forces and becomes an active mechanism of political struggle to direct the moods of the masses. This reality is a serious challenge for mass media² and, at the same time, a matter of choice for a media outlet: to become a participant in this process and spread the content of political forces with the effect of multiplication or to exercise moderation by multiplying the volume of one's own work.

Hence, by this study, our organization is aspiring to assist persons carrying out a journalistic mission in performing their work in line with the highest professional standards by applying the experience accumulated by seasoned colleagues.

In this study, engaged were journalists experienced in covering all stages of national and local electoral processes and studied and presented are the main obstacles to coverage, which journalists encounter in performance of their professional activities. The organization's experience and knowledge of covering elections accumulated during the activities of many years also served as a source of data for the study.³

The goal of the research is to help beginner journalists to improve the effectiveness of their work, to contribute to the normalization of the media domain, and to make the

¹ <https://ombuds.am/am/site/ViewNews/1737>

² <https://uic.am/8297>

³ <https://bit.ly/3ET6bip>
<https://bit.ly/3MwyhTg>

coverage of electoral processes more unbiased. The starting point for us is the enormous role journalists play in facilitating voter engagement, awareness, honest political struggle, and inclusiveness of the entire electoral process. There are a number of important principles, to which, in our opinion, journalists should pay special attention in the process of covering elections. In addition to disinterestedness and impartiality, such principles include coverage of participation of women, youth, national minorities, and people with disabilities.

We hope that this research will serve as a practically applicable guide for beginner journalists, assisting them in their difficult and worthwhile work.

Methodology

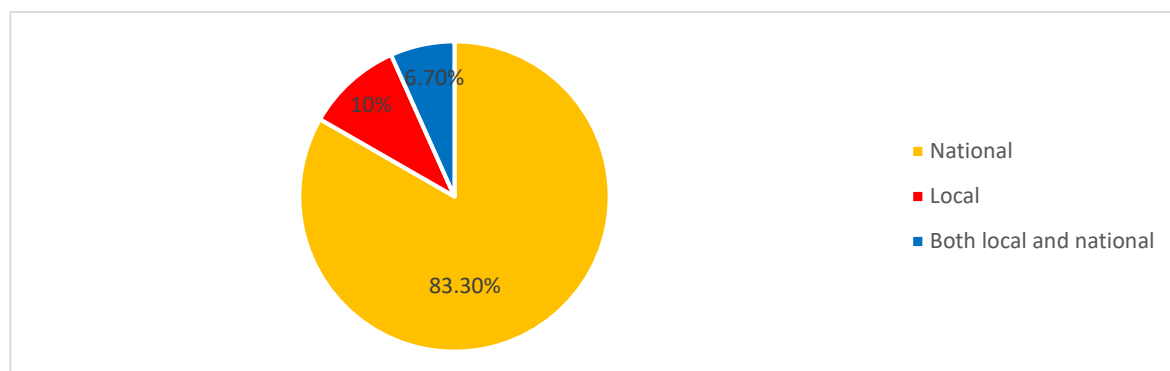
The research was conducted in the framework of the “Elections4ALL-2021 – Domestic Observations and Citizens Empowerment by Civil Society” project.

The focus group of the research engaged 31 journalists from different media outlets, who had at least three years of professional experience and at the same time, an experience of covering electoral processes in the entire territory of the Republic of Armenia during both national and local government elections. During the conduct of the research, information was collected through:

- Meetings/interviews with journalists
- Study of the coverage of the campaigns.

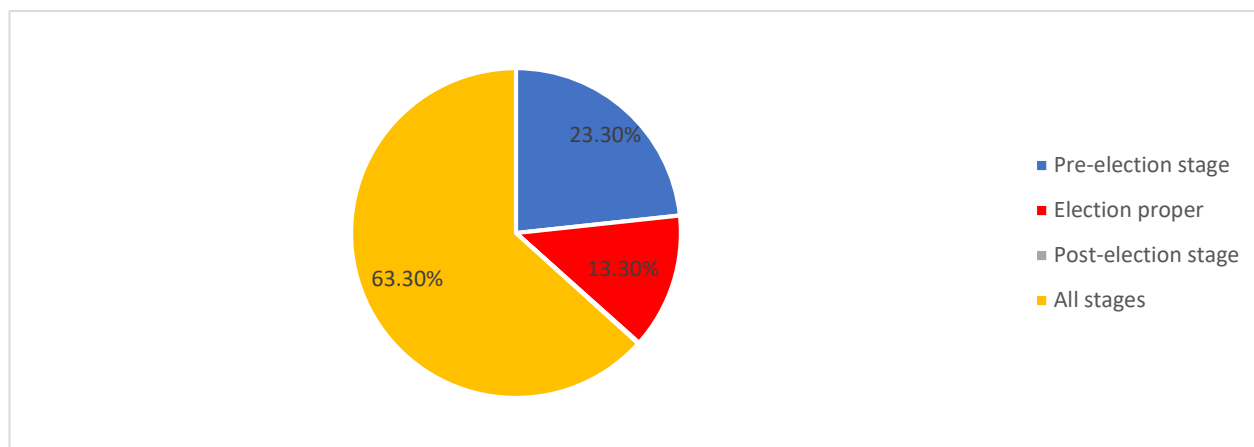
Coverage of the Electoral Process: Main Challenges and Obstacles

Eighty points three per cent of the 31 journalists that participated in the study and survey have the experience of covering national and local government elections, 10% only national elections, and 6.7% only local elections



The importance of the transparency and coverage of the entire electoral process, as well as of provision of timely and proper information to the electorate is one of the main prerequisites for fair and democratic elections. Coverage of different stages of the process is important in its own way in terms of decision-making, transparency, and accountability.

Sixty-three point three per cent of the journalists participating in the research attached great importance to the coverage of all the stages of the electoral process, 23.3% prioritized the pre-election stage, 13.3% the election proper, and only 0.1% the post-electoral stage.



Viewing the electoral process, the greater part of the study participant journalists prefers to cover it in its entirety with the purpose of understanding the entire electoral chain, keeping essential episodes in the spotlight and presenting them to the public. Important and main points of coverage that the journalist should address right from the start are as follows:

- Justifications for nomination of the candidate,
- His/her correspondence to the given status,
- Awareness of voter needs and priorities of the given period,
- Willingness to listen to voters and realization that voters will be able to influence his/her decision making.

From the perspective of effective public oversight, an interconnected coverage of all stages and viewing it as a long-term process strengthens the possibility for conduct of elections meeting the criteria of freedom, independence, and democracy. Proper coverage of the pre-election situation, campaigns, preliminary violations, election violations on the Election Day proper, directed elections, the vote counting process, and post-election developments is a long-term contribution to transparent formation of political power in the country.

Twenty-three point three per cent of the journalists participating in the study attach greater importance to the publicity of the pre-election stage since they believe that this stage of the process is crucial and decisive from the perspective of voting results. Journalists working in the field also justify this point of view by peculiarities of the audience, its perceptions, and the degree of media literacy.

Over the past four years, based on own expediencies in the political field resulting in massive use of dishonest information technologies, information provision and social

platforms have been flooded by manipulative misinformation and hate speech, upon which the main messages and content of campaigns is built. This method is applied and works successfully because of the low level of media literacy of the greater part of society, politicization of the media, and extreme public perceptions. An objective coverage of this stage is more than important since it conditions the process and outcome of elections.

Thirteen point three per cent of respondent journalists consider coverage of the election proper as one of the important functions of the journalistic activities in terms of presenting the situation, preventing, revealing, recording, overseeing election violations and falsifications, and publicizing illegalities. Coverage of the process of the election proper is considered more complicated since main obstacles to the journalistic activities occur at this very stage.

Only 0.1% of respondent journalists have singled out the post-election stage attaching importance to post-election developments from the perspective of assessment of preliminary expectations and the outcome.

The Main Problems of Electoral Process Coverage as Reflected in the Media

The study helped reveal that journalists themselves believe that coverage of the electoral process in Armenia does not ensure pluralism. The following problems are singled out and emphasized from the perspective of bias:

- Dissemination of unverified, false news; biased coverage based on an emphatically political orientation and biased approach;
- Biased coverage, servicing some political line conditioned by involvement of as much financial resources as possible during the election period;
- Mass media polarization and political agenda, which implies manipulation of the public opinion depriving the citizen of the opportunity to make a fully informed and conscious choice;
- One-sided coverage conditioned by political sympathies, for example, one-sided presentation of hate speech;
- Existence of political owners of media outlets, which right from the start rules out neutrality and creates a risk of spreading manipulative or distorted information in the person of representatives of rival camps;
- Open political orientation of journalists, sometimes manifestations of aggression against this or that team.

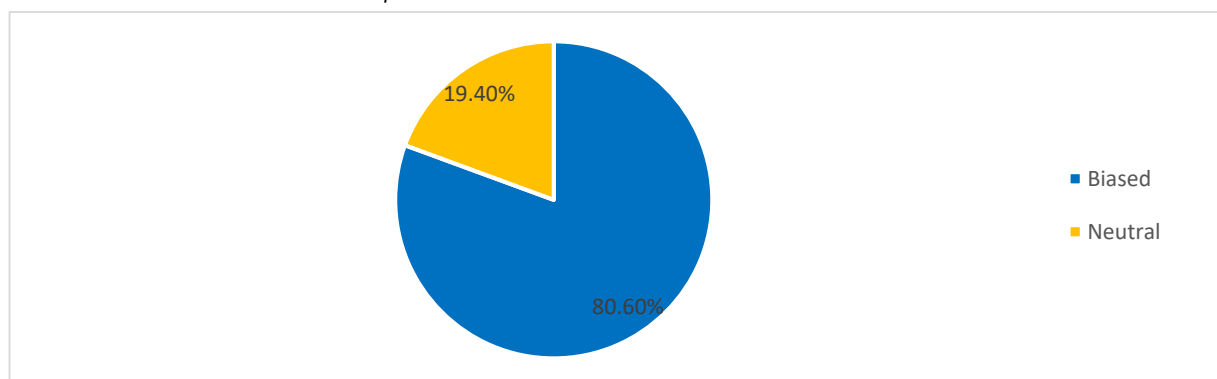
In our media field in general, electoral processes act as a catalyst revealing the affiliation of some media outlets to a force or a person.

From the perspective of professional skills, the following problems are especially striking:

- Existence of hastily-prepared shallow materials simply to feed the news stream;

- Non-operativeness due to the scarcity of resources; importance attached by some media outlets to certain events and polling stations and neglect of others;
- Not knowing the Electoral Code and rights and responsibilities of journalists during the electoral process;
- Carrying out pre-election campaign on silence and election days.

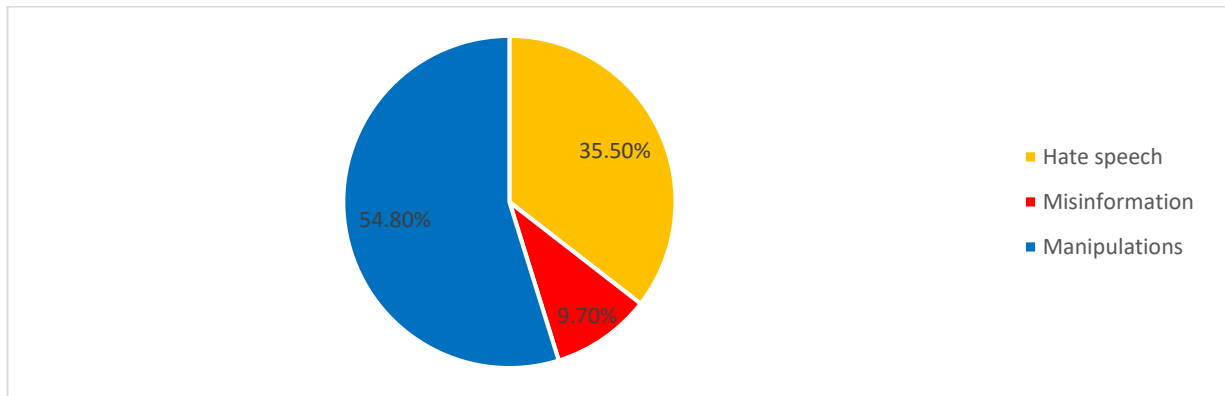
Thus, 80.6% of survey participants consider the coverage of the electoral process in Armenian media as biased, and 19.4% as neutral.



As a result of the study, we have identified a number of obstacles impeding the effectiveness and objectivity of coverage of the elections:

- Oriented politicization and bias of the media;
- The inaccessibility and unwillingness of representatives of political forces to communicate;
- Insufficient media resources, which has an impact on the proportionate coverage; no media outlet in Armenia can provide general coverage;
- Pressures on journalists in small communities, all know each other and cannot provide objective coverage;
- Absence of understanding of the role and significance of journalists by the public, prejudiced and negative attitude to their work;
- The devaluation of journalism by political forces and high-ranking officials;
- The journalist's constraint by the media's internal regulations and political agenda;
- Low professionalism and bias of journalists, their superficial ideas about election programs;
- Journalists are not allowed to take pictures, attempts are made to turn off their video cameras, demands are made that journalists leave and journalists' questions are answered in a rude way;
- Lack of knowledge of journalists' rights and obstruction of coverage by precinct electoral commissions and proxies;
- Absence of the public interest in pre-election programs.

Fifty-four point eight per cent of research participant journalists believe that manipulations are an obstacle to objective coverage of election campaigns, 35.5% think that hate speech is the impediment, and 9.7% see misinformation as the cause.



In the opinion of the same focus group, manipulations, hate speech, and misinformation spread by political forces during their campaigns were spread through the mass media with the effect of multiplication. There are three reasons for this spread:

- Intentionality, servicing political interests

Taking into consideration politicization of the Armenian media, primarily servicing various political interests, the extremely acute political situation and the role of the dominant yellow press, misinformation, manipulations, and hate speech are widespread.

- Lack of fact-checking skills, absence of fact-checking teams in media outlets

Especially during the pre-election stage, events evolve rapidly, and a need arises to bring the news to the audience as soon as possible.

Due to the scarcity of media resources, the greater part of media outlets does not have fact-checking teams. Journalists' overload, lack of knowledge of fact-checking tools leads to the transmission of voiced ideas to the audience without checking their veracity and without filtering. Often, media outlets exactly reproduce the rhetoric of manipulation and hate speech and, in response to the criticism of them, state that they are quotes from politicians' statements, removing the responsibility from themselves.

- Selection of a media outlet with a view to securing views and involvement of the audience

Some mass media outlets work to exactly spread misinformation, manipulation, and hate speech since such content is widespread and very popular in the audience.

While covering elections and encountering *manipulations and hate speech*, focus group participant journalists tried to uphold the journalistic ethics to the extent possible and, if possible, to filter and not publicise these manifestations. Some, as a matter of principle, removed these parts from their materials, regardless of which political force they targeted.

The journalists have also noted that it is impossible to completely filter and abstain since, during pre-election campaigns, statements by candidates are disseminated, which contain hate speech, and interviews and live broadcasts are conducted.

In order to be free from *misinformation*, the journalists filtered the information, gave preference to reliable, open sources and, if possible, checked the facts. In order not to give way to manipulations and knowing the political field, they checked a piece of news with several sources. Journalists often make use of the archives to remind of the previous statements by a given force or politician for comparison with information from another source.

The focus group journalists specially emphasize preparing in advance, giving all parties the opportunity to voice their opinions, recording and videotaping facts, checking facts by different methods: on-site visits, Internet search, and comparison of official and unofficial sources.

Based on the research, practical pieces of advice have been developed for young, beginner students on how to contribute to objective, unbiased, and trustworthy coverage of the electoral process:

- Be honest with your own conscience, develop professional qualities, remember: the journalist is a recorder of facts, and not their evaluator;
- Be unbiased, impartial, objective, and give all sides the opportunity to voice their opinions;
- Check the received information and be politically neutral;
- While performing journalistic activities, be responsible, operative, brave, quickly orient in different situations, and watch your own words and behavior;
- Be honest, confident, and never allow directing you. Be polite to people, act in a way that your example helps the development of a positive image of the journalist among people;
- Know your rights in order not to be manipulated. Do not manipulate yourself either, if you have been to 5 polling stations during the day and nothing interesting has happened yet, do not try to provoke or invent a sensation;
- Do not be carried away by emotions, always be balanced;
- Know the requirements of the Electoral Code, familiarize yourself, in advance, with the rights of journalists and election participants, and defend your rights without violating those of others;
- Study, in detail, the pre-election programs of forces running in elections, biographies and activities of candidates, the demographic picture of the given populated area, and the results of the previous elections at a given polling station. Know the responsibilities of the members of electoral commissions, observers, proxies and journalists, as well as permissible and impermissible possible actions;

- Study archived materials to understand the trajectory of a political force or a politician, arm yourself with information to prevent manipulation and misinformation;
- Pay attention to the entire process of elections, do not get involved in an argument, perform your journalistic work: follow and cover;
- Be as restrained as possible when covering elections without turning into activists;
- Do not become a mere mouthpiece for any force or politician, no matter how much you sympathize with them. Also, the opposite;
- Never stop learning, develop your professional skills for search, research, and fact checking.