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Module 3: Covering Elections

The resources in this module focus on mitigating risk – physically, mentally, and digitally – when covering elections. When covering elections, journalists must make intentional choices to protect themselves, their colleagues, and their sources. Election coverage involves many challenges, and journalists covering elections – domestically and abroad – face unique circumstances.

Deepening political polarization has led to increased fearmongering and disinformation. The stakes have increased, and the upcoming U.S. elections will have ramifications not only domestically, but globally. As such, the media plays an essential role in the implementation of fair and free democratic elections. With this additional pressure, covering elections can be demanding, stressful, and, at times, dangerous for reporters. Journalists should familiarize themselves with election issues and laws – local, statewide, and national – when reporting.

For journalists covering elections, situational awareness is of the utmost importance. Completing a risk assessment is essential for those working individually or with a team. Given the heightened security surrounding elections, press cards and IDs, whether visible or concealed, should always be readily available. When on assignment, journalists should identify exit routes and trust their guts if and when disturbances arise. Whenever possible, journalists should strive to never travel alone, and should inform colleagues, newsrooms managers, and/or family of assignment locations and arrival and departure times. Stress levels may elevate quickly so journalists should monitor not only their personal concerns, but also the concerns of those they work with. Lastly, journalists are encouraged to use secure apps and social media accounts that do not delve into their personal lives.

Learning Objectives

1. Students will be able to identify specific challenges, including the spread of misinformation and disinformation, when reporting on elections.
2. Students will develop effective strategies for assessing and mitigating risks when covering elections.
3. Students will recognize the importance of completing risk assessments before covering elections and/or other political gatherings.
4. Students will be more equipped to protect their mobile devices when covering elections.

Readings/Resources

Elections Reporting, International Journalists' Network (ijnet.org)

IJNet offers a host of resources for journalists covering elections. Topics include disinformation, misinformation, incorporating a gender perspective, how to avoid “horse race” coverage, digital security, covering civil unrest, how to engage audiences, and more.

“Covering Elections: Journalist Safety Kit” Committee to Protect Journalists

This easy-to-follow safety kit, updated in July 2022, contains essential information and advice for covering elections. According to *CPJ*, “During elections, journalists frequently cover rallies, campaign events, and protests, which can increase their risk of being attacked, harassed, and detained. CPJ Emergencies has compiled an Election Safety Kit with information for editors, reporters, and photojournalists on how to prepare for elections and how to mitigate physical, psychological, and digital risk.” Topics in this safety kit include editor’s safety checklist, risk assessment, physical safety, psychological safety, and digital safety.

Discussion Questions

1. Who should complete a **risk assessment**? Why is completing a risk assessment important?
2. What precautions can journalists take to mitigate risks to themselves and others?
3. What responsibilities do newsroom managers have when sending out reporters to cover political rallies and elections?

“Advice for reporters covering unrest during elections” Jorge Luis Sierra, *International Journalists’ Network*

This resource covers identifies some risks and threats that journalists may face when covering political rallies and election events in the United States. The author, Jorge Luis Sierra, draws upon his experience training journalists in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. Sierra points out that the same dangers that journalists face around the world are becoming more common in the U.S.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some physical insecurities journalists covering elections in the United States face?
2. What practical advice can journalists preparing to cover elections implement?

“Covering the 2024 elections? Here are some tips and resources from IRE experts” Investigative Reporters & Editors (IRE)

Natalia Contreras, Anna Massoglia, and Derek Willis offer their insights on covering the 2024 elections. This brief handout offers seven tips to younger journalists covering elections, perhaps for the first time. The tips, ranging from the importance of fact-checking to gaining an understanding of how elections are run, offer several jumping off points for robust discussions about how to cover elections.

Discussion Questions

1. What tips do the three experts offer young journalists when covering elections? Explain.
2. Why is it important for journalists to know how elections are run?
3. Why should journalists covering local elections connect with election officials?

“What journalists need to know about the laws on covering elections” Amy Sherman, *Poynter*.

This resource explains the important role journalists play in providing accurate reporting to help the public understand elections. Aldana Vales writes, “When a journalist is covering the process of voting — whether it’s for mayor, governor or senator — the goal is the same: show the public the truth about the

administration of elections. Accurate reporting about elections helps reduce the spread of unfounded rumors.” This article delves into the rights journalists have, the types of records that are public, and laws related to covering election-related protests.

Discussion Questions

1. **What rights do journalists have when cover elections?**
2. **Are there any laws journalists should be aware of when covering election-related protests?**
3. **How does understanding election law constitute a safety issue for journalists (both their own safety and the safety of others)?**



Election Legal Guide from *Reporters Committee for the Freedom of the Press* (Updated 2024)

About this guide: “This guide was originally authored in 2020 by Reporters Committee attorneys Sarah Matthews and Gunita Singh, legal fellows Audrey Greene and Kamesha Laurry, and legal interns Emma Lux and Shontee Pant. It was updated in 2024 by legal fellows Zach Babo, Julia Dacy, Mayeesha Galiba, and Daniela Wertheimer.”

This election legal guide, which can be studied in full or in sections, is an invaluable resource for journalists covering elections. The guide provides “a general summary of information about campaign events, exit polling, newsgathering in or near polling places, ballot selfies, and access to ballots and election records. The subsequent sections provide more specific information on each of the following battleground states: Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.”

Discussion Questions

1. **What political events (rallies, elections, etc.) do journalists have the right to attend and cover?**
2. **How do election laws vary from state to state? Why is this important to know?**

“12 tips for minding the security of your mobile device when covering elections” Jorge Luis

Sierra, *International Journalists’ Network*

Digital security is an important safety aspect – and one that may be overlooked – when covering elections. Journalists should take extra precautions to protect their mobile devices. According to this article, “Journalists covering elections in difficult environments marked by violence and censorship face significant risk of being attacked by state or non-state actors who are able to intercept their mobile phone communications, uncover data pertaining their sources, and learn about their investigative activities.” Journalists covering elections in the United States are not immune to these risks.

Discussion Questions

1. **What steps can journalists take to protect their mobile devices?**
2. **Are students currently taking any of the steps outlined in this article to protect their mobile devices? Should these steps be followed at all times?**
3. **Why is protecting mobile devices important – for journalists, their colleagues, and their sources?**

“What journalists need to know to combat information disorder” [Amarah Ennis, *International Journalists’ Network*](#)

This article focuses on misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Unfortunately, according to Dr. Claire Wardle, the co-director of the Information Futures Lab at Brown University, these terms are often viewed interchangeably. Wardle argues that journalists should have an understanding of how these terms differ. If there is a lack of familiarity, “journalists can unwittingly play a role in spreading disinformation on a wider scale. For example, Wardle’s team found that the major U.S. news channels, MSNBC, CNN and Fox News, aired more than 32 hours of coverage specifically around Donald Trump’s tweets, visually displaying 1,954 of them on screen, between January 2020 and January 2021. With often insufficient effort to debunk the content, the TV channels helped ensure Trump and his false claims dominated narratives around the election.”

Discussion Questions

1. **Why is it important for journalists to understand the distinction between mis-, dis-, and mal-information? How is this a safety concern?**
2. **How can “bad actors” use journalists to spread bad information? What can journalists do to prevent this? Do Wardle’s examples about Covid/health concerns relate to election coverage?**

“How to cover Election Day and beyond” [Vivian Schiller and Garrett M. Graff, *Columbia Journalism Review*](#).

This resource considers the important role that journalists play in the public sphere. Schiller and Graff get right to the point: “Americans think about elections wrong; they aren’t only about tallying votes to declare a winner. Elections in a democracy are just as much about convincing the loser that he or she actually lost—and that the process was free, fair, and secure enough that the loser can accept the result as legitimate.” From there, Schiller and Graff explain the importance of not just *what* journalists cover regarding elections, but *how* they cover elections. This includes the importance of the language used, an understanding of election calendars, an awareness of when votes are counted, not parroting claims of fraud and/or premature announcements of victory or defeat.

Discussion Questions

1. **Why is the language journalists choose to use during election coverage so important?**
2. **Why is it important to fact-check and not just parrot what campaign representatives say?**
3. **When should election results be known (e.g., should election results be known the night of the election, within a few days, a week)? Why is this an important issue to consider?**
4. **How can journalists hold election officials accountable?**
5. **What other advice is offered to help prepare journalists?**