

The Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage (Revised Edition, 2018)

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PREAMBLE

WHEREAS it is an established principle that the ability of citizens to make informed choices strengthens democracy;

WHEREAS it is equally established that democracy thrives on good democratic practices, the kernel of which is the right of the people, to freely and knowledgeably choose their representatives;

RECOGNIZING that the media enables voters to make informed choices by providing information that enhances their knowledge of electoral processes;

NOTING that the media as watchdog of the society should be catalysts of transparent electoral processes and credible, free, fair and peaceful elections;

REALIZING that this obligation entails the performance of oversight, public education, open forum and conflict management roles by the media during elections;

CONSCIOUS that the effective performance of these important roles requires the observance of the highest standards of professionalism, maximum compliance with regulatory frameworks and deference to the public good and interest;

AGREEING therefore that it is desirable to have a set of guidelines that regulates the professional and ethical conduct of the media and journalists during elections;

MINDFUL of the fact that compliance with the guidelines will contribute to the conduct of credible elections and corresponding social order;

KNOWING that such guidelines should align with international standards, instruments and declarations on best practices in election reporting with the underpinning principles of:

- The right of citizens to freely express themselves and have unfettered access to information on the electoral processes;
- The right of the media to freely access and truthfully disseminate information on the electoral processes;
- The right of media access by parties, candidates and under-represented groups; and
- The promotion of democratic norms and values.

WE, the representatives of Nigerian media organisations, institutions, professional bodies and support groups, hereby agree to adopt and abide by this CODE.

STATEMENT OF BROAD PRINCIPLES

This media code of election coverage is predicated on the principle and expectation that relevant stakeholders, including the Government, the Political Parties, the Election Management Body and Civil Society Organisations will contribute to the creation of an enabling environment for the media to perform its professional and social obligations during electoral processes.

i. The Government

- The government and its agencies shall ensure the safety of journalists during electoral processes, including refraining from assault or intimidation in any manner whatsoever;
- The government and its relevant agencies shall ensure prompt investigation and prosecution of any individual or group accused of assault or intimidation against the media and journalists during electoral processes;
- The government and its agencies shall channel any complaint over the conduct of journalists during electoral processes to regulatory or legal institutions and refrain from extra-judicial actions or other forms of self-help;
- The government and its agencies shall ensure the free movement of journalists in any part of the country during electoral processes and refrain from any act that shall inhibit such;
- The government shall abide by institutional, regulatory and legal frameworks requiring equitable access to state media by parties and candidates contesting elections.

ii. Political Parties

- Political parties shall respect the right of journalists to cover and report their activities and refrain from harassing or intimidating them in any manner whatsoever;
- Political parties should support the investigation of any act of assault or intimidation against the media and journalists by their members or agents and ensure that alleged perpetrators are promptly brought to justice;

- Political parties shall channel any complaint arising from the conduct of journalists covering their activities to regulatory or legal institutions and refrain from extra-judicial actions or any other form of self-help;
- Political parties shall provide prompt notification and adequate information about their activities;
- Political parties shall not offer bribes or other forms of inducement to journalists to publish or suppress information about themselves or their activities.

iii. The Election Management Bodies (INEC and SIEC)

- The Election management bodies; (Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and State Independent Electoral Commission (SIEC) in each of the thirty-six States of the federation, shall proactively provide the media and journalists with information on its activities to aid the factual and credible reporting of electoral processes;
- The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and State Independent Electoral Commission (SIEC) shall provide information and materials to the media to enable them carry out accurate and effective civic and voter education;
- The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and State Independent Electoral Commission (SIEC) should support capacity building for journalists and other media professionals on election reporting;
- The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and State Independent Electoral Commission (SIEC) shall make electoral information freely available to the media to enhance factual and credible reporting of electoral processes;

iv. Civil Society Organisations and Media Support Groups

- CSOs, including Media Support Groups, shall collaborate with the media on the conduct of civic and voter education;
- CSOs, including Media Support Groups, shall support capacity building for Journalists and other media professionals on election reporting;
- CSOs, including Media Support Groups, shall take proactive measures in the defense of the right of the media and journalists to freely report electoral processes without any form of harassment or intimidation;

- CSOs, including Media Support Groups, shall proactively share reports of their observations of electoral processes with the media.

SECTION 1.

1.0. Equitable Access

The performance of campaign platform and public forum role of the media during elections requires deference to the right of parties and candidates in elections to equitable media access. This is as envisaged by legislative and institutional frameworks and other relevant instruments, including the Electoral Act (as amended), the Nigerian Broadcasting Code (as revised) and the Nigeria Press Organisation Code of Ethics. It also requires giving opportunity to under-represented groups to express their views.

Accordingly:

1.1. Parties and Candidates

The Responsibilities of Media Organisations

- 1.1.1. A broadcast medium shall ensure equitable allocation of airtime at specific but similar periods for all parties contesting elections to present their manifestoes;
- 1.1.2. A media organisation shall regularly apply the principle of equity in the coverage and reportage of campaigns and other activities of parties and candidates contesting elections;
- 1.1.3. A media organisation shall at all times uphold the right of parties and candidates to reply to allegations made against them;
- 1.1.4. A broadcast medium shall strive to ensure the participation of all parties and candidates contesting elections in political debates.

1.2. Under-represented groups

The Responsibilities of Media Organisations

- 1.2.1. A media organisation shall, as a matter of deliberate editorial policy, target under-represented groups, especially women, youths, persons living with disabilities and rural dwellers in the coverage of electoral processes;

- 1.2.2. A media organisation shall consciously reflect the views and perspectives of women, youths, persons living with disabilities and rural dwellers in electoral reports.

SECTION 2.

2.0. Professionalism & Social Responsibility

As the key purveyor of information on the electoral processes, the media shall at all times, embrace best professional practices by acting in accordance with the principles of social responsibility.

Accordingly:

2.1. Fairness, Accuracy and Balance

The responsibilities of journalists

- 2.1.1. A journalist shall report elections accurately and without bias;
- 2.1.2. A journalist shall report elections in a fair and balanced manner;
- 2.1.3. A journalist shall report only fact-based electoral information;
- 2.1.4. A journalist shall verify any allegation made against a party, candidate or any other interest before publishing while reflect all sides in the story;
- 2.1.5. A journalist shall report the views of candidates and political parties directly and in their own words, while exercising necessary professional discretion, rather than as they are interpreted by others;

The responsibilities of media organisations

- 2.1.6. A media organisation shall ensure accurate and impartial voter education of parties, candidates, registration, verification, voting centres, voting procedures, complaint procedures, etc as provided by relevant laws and agencies;
- 2.1.7. A media organisation shall strive to disseminate voter education in indigenous languages and/or through messages that target under-represented groups including women, youth and People Living with Disabilities;

- 2.1.8. A media organisation shall uphold the right of the people to free expression by providing opportunity for under-represented groups to express their views during electoral processes.

SECTION 3:

3.0. Ethical Conduct

Good journalism requires decent conduct that conforms to acceptable social norms, values and ethical codes; it also requires that journalists are well resourced and are able to act independently of the subjects of their reports.

Accordingly:

3.1. Integrity

The responsibilities of journalists

- 3.1.1. A journalist shall NOT solicit or accept bribes or make other pecuniary demands from parties and candidates to publish or suppress reports;
- 3.1.2. A journalist shall NOT express personal opinion as facts in reports;
- 3.1.3. A journalist shall NOT use or display any insignia of candidates and parties in the course of professional duty;

The responsibilities of media organisations

- 3.1.4. A media organisation shall respect and abide by the confidentiality of sources;
- 3.1.5. A media organisation shall provide adequate resources for journalists to independently report activities of parties and candidates;
- 3.1.6. A media organisation shall strive not to publish or air news and analyses that are one-sided.

3.2. Credibility:

The responsibilities of journalists

- 3.2.1. A journalist shall use investigative methods and instruments to ensure factual and accurate reporting of electoral processes;

3.2.2. A journalist shall avoid excessive reliance on press releases and media briefings;

3.2.3. A journalist shall not distort or deliberately misrepresent the facts of a political or electoral issue;

The responsibilities of media organisations

3.2.4. A media organisation shall at all times uphold the right of reply to issues in election reports and programmes;

3.2.5. A media organisation shall promptly correct any inaccurate, misleading or false information with the same prominence as the original report.

3.3. Opinion Polls:

The responsibilities of journalists

3.3.1. A journalist shall ensure due diligence and exercise restraint in reporting the methodologies and findings of election opinion polls by clearly stating the context, particularly:

- Those who commissioned and conducted the poll;
- The specific questions that were asked;
- The number and diversity of people interviewed; and
- The limitations and margin of error of the poll.

The responsibilities of media organisations

3.3.2. A media organisation shall make use of scientific methodologies in conducting election opinion polls. They should also clearly state the context, particularly:

- The specific questions that were asked;
- The number and diversity of people interviewed;
- The limitations and margin of error of the poll.

3.4. Endorsements:

The responsibilities of media organisations

3.4.1. A government-owned media organisation shall not endorse political parties or candidate(s) for particular office(s).

3.4.2. A private media organisation that endorses candidate(s) for particular office(s) shall ensure that the endorsement does not affect its commitment to the balanced coverage of parties and candidates contesting elections.

3.5. Political advertisement:

The responsibilities of media organisations

3.5.1. A media organisation shall clearly identify political adverts and advertorials. They should refrain from presenting them as independent news or opinion of the organisation;

3.5.2. A media organisation shall not publish or air political adverts, advertorials and sponsored political news capable of inciting hatred or violence.

SECTION 4.

4.0. Hate Speech and Incitement

Hate speech and other forms of incitement could lead to violence and threaten the democratic fabric of a society. The social obligations of the media during elections therefore include the prevention of hate speech.

The African Commission on Human and People's Rights defines hate speech as any form of speech which degrades others, promotes hatred and encourages violence against a group on the basis of the following criteria: race, colour, religion, national origin, gender, disability or a number of other traits.

Accordingly:

The responsibilities of journalists

4.1. A journalist shall use temperate language and avoid expressions that dehumanize parties, aspirants, candidates or other groups;

4.2. A presenter of a programme in any broadcast medium shall refrain from pejorative comments;

- 4.3. A journalist shall prior to a programme brief interviewees or guests on the need to avoid hateful comments;
- 4.4. A journalist shall immediately reject hateful comments from guests/speakers in a live or recorded programme, press conference, political gathering, etc;
- 4.5. A journalist shall immediately request his or her interviewees/guests to withdraw any hateful comments;
- 4.6. A journalist shall not use images or pictures that contain elements of hateful representations of parties, aspirants, candidates or other groups;

The responsibilities of media organisations

- 4.7. A media organisation shall have an anti-hate speech reporting policy that clearly states, among others, that hate speech or inciting messages are not permitted on its social media platforms;
- 4.8. A media organisation shall reject any material intended for publication or airing by parties, aspirants, candidates and other interests that contains hateful or inciting words or messages;
- 4.9. A media organisation shall refrain from publishing or airing abusive editorial comments or opinions that denigrate individuals or groups on account of disability, race, ethnicity, tribe, gender, belief or other traits;
- 4.10. A media organisation shall meticulously monitor the content of its social media platforms to stop the spread of hate speech or other inciting messages;
- 4.11. A media organisation shall take advantage of fact-checking tools to avoid publishing or broadcasting unverified materials from social media platforms;
- 4.12. A broadcast medium shall, prior to a recorded or a live political debate, request participants to endorse a NO-HATE-SPEECH MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING committing them NOT to use words or expressions that disparage others on account of disability, race, ethnicity, tribe, gender, belief or other traits;

- 4.13. Media organisations shall build the capacity of journalists and other media professionals in their employment to understand hate speech and its implications.

SECTION 5.

5.0. Conflict Sensitivity

Violent conflicts are obstacles to the conduct of free, fair and peaceful elections as they could lead to voter apathy and hinder the free performance of media roles and responsibilities during electoral processes.

Accordingly:

The responsibilities of journalists

- 5.1. A journalist shall be conflict-sensitive and report early warning signals of possible outbreak of violent conflict during elections;
- 5.2. A journalist shall work for the de-escalation of violent conflicts, should they occur during elections;
- 5.3. A journalist shall give equitable opportunity to diverse sides of a political or electoral conflict to state their case;
- 5.4. A journalist shall use temperate language and non-offensive images in reporting political/electoral tensions and conflicts;
- 5.5. A journalist shall keep to the facts of a political/electoral conflict;
- 5.6. A journalist shall be cautious in reporting figures and identities of casualties of violent conflicts;

The responsibilities of media organisations

- 5.7. A media organisation shall work for the reduction of conflict and promote the common values of peace without compromising the duty to inform;
- 5.8. A media organisation shall exercise professional discretion in news reporting and casting of headlines to avoid publishing or broadcasting information that may lead to or escalate violent conflict.

SECTION 6.

6.0. Monitoring, Implementation and Enforcement

Internal Mechanisms

- 6.1. A media organisation shall regularly monitor its election reports to ensure compliance with the standards set out in this Code.
- 6.2. The professional organisations endorsing this Code agree to use existing internal mechanisms, including the office of the Ombudsman, Ethics Committee, Disciplinary Committee or some other such arrangement to ensure its implementation.
- 6.3. Each media organisation shall ensure that the mechanism has the requisite instruments, resources and authority to play the role effectively of ensuring compliance with the Code by both individual journalists as well as the media organisation.
- 6.4. Each media organisation shall ensure that those on election coverage duty as well as other assignments are properly trained and adhere strictly to the provisions of this Code to protect the institution's credibility.

SECTION 7.

7.0. Binding provisions/effective date of operation:

- 7.1. The regulations in this revised code were adopted on this 23rd day of May, 2018.

This code is endorsed by the following media stakeholders:

MEDIA CODE OF ELECTION COVERGE. REV. 2018