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ELECTIONS AND ELECTION REPORTING

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.

Presentation becomes of paramount importance so that the concepts embodied in the democratic electoral process can become properly understood. The wide use of graphics and illustrations helps to ensure public interest in what can be a "dry" subject.

In emerging democracies, providing the electorate information about the alternatives may not be sufficient. Again there is a role for the press in this process to ensure that the public understand how to vote, how to avoid being entangled in electoral fraud and undue influence. It is also the responsibility of the press to ensure that a forum for reasonably impartial discussion and debate is provided.

The CPU has, for many years, advocated and implemented serious and well-structured election reporting courses for political and other journalists.

This has been carried out in various Commonwealth countries in the lead-up to elections. It is imperative that journalists are well-informed and up to date on the key issues and personalities so that this information can be objectively passed on to the readership.

Aside from informing the readers, there is another area of concern during elections and that is the role and behaviour of the press itself.

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Three years ago, the CPU after discussion with its membership, offered the facility of Media Election Monitoring. This concept was separate and totally different from traditional election observing; the team played no part in observing the electoral process, rather they monitored the objectivity and responsibility of the press during the campaign and up to and including polling day. (See also, the attached concept paper).

We only go into a country if invited by the press of that country. We place independent, senior working journalists (generally editors) in each of the newspaper houses in the countries concerned and these team members "monitor" the papers for the duration of their stay in country. (This tends to be for at least the last three weeks of the election campaign up to and including polling day.) During their time with the newspapers they have access to all aspects of the paper, including attending editorial meetings, going out on the campaign trail with journalists etc.

At the end of the exercise, the team leader – in collaboration with his colleagues – writes a comprehensive report of their findings plus recommendations which they all sign and is circulated to all interested parties.

The CPU has already undertaken two election media monitoring exercises, in Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe – both very difficult venues - and full reports are available if you want to see them. (I can email them to you)

From these reports we have gained valuable insights into future training requirements of various newspapers. Of course, the reports are not necessarily always favourable but they are honest and objective.

The CPU would like to undertake further Election Media Monitoring (as you will see from the concept paper) but it is a costly and time consuming exercise (the two we have undertaken have cost £8,000 for Sri Lanka and £14,000 for Zimbabwe which had a larger team). However, both the ones we have implemented to date were very much last minute affairs and with the benefit of a longer lead-time and forward planning costs could probably be reduced.

I also, personally, feel that there is a serious need for basic training for journalists on the electoral process. Quite a lot of our training pre-supposes a level of knowledge

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which is not necessarily there and it is, of course, from a journalistic standpoint. It would be very valuable to work with an organisation such as IDEA to draw on their expertise to teach journalists (as you know, we think we know it all!) the basics – which they often overlook.

Also, the idea of trying to reach global guidelines is admirable but they would have to be tailored to local needs even though the basis could be global. We have talked about trying to do this – certainly in a Commonwealth context – and I feel it could be valuable. Frankly, many of my colleagues out there allow their personal political views to overspill into their writing which consequently can become very subjective.

Hope this helps.