

Tips for Journalists and Editors who Cover Election Observation

This document offers some quick advice for journalists and editors who cover election observation. It comes from a project based at the University of Edinburgh in which the research team looked at citizen perceptions and media representations of election observation missions in Kenya, The Gambia and Zambia. To date, the project has interviewed a total of 760 informants, including 40 editors and journalists who have covered election observers.

Why is it important for the media to cover election observation missions (EOMs)?

- Our research shows that citizens tend to be very interested in hearing about the activities and findings of election observation missions.
- However, it also shows that very little of this information reaches the public. The media can play an important role in bridging this gap.

Interacting with Election Observation Missions (EOMs)

- Most EOMs actively seek media coverage and will be receptive to requests for information if formally approached.
- EOMs are also keen that only their official positions become public. As a result, most members of EOMs are not permitted to share information with the media.
- However, most larger missions will have a dedicated press/media/communications officer. Identifying those people will facilitate interactions with the missions.
- It is useful to interact with missions early. Like the media, EOMs get busier as election day approaches. Therefore, they have more time to interact meaningfully with the media earlier in the process.

Considering Different Missions

- Different EOMs have varying approaches to how they assess election quality, so it is worth getting perspectives from a range of international, regional and citizen EOMs.
- It is important to be specific about which missions are being referred to in any subsequent coverage, as not all the missions may hold the same views.

Covering Preliminary Statements

- It is customary for EOMs to release preliminary statements before the electoral process is complete (often two days after election day). At that stage of the process, the missions cannot give final verdicts on all aspects of the election. For example, they often explicitly say that they are not commenting on ongoing tallying processes.
- In these statements, the missions often give nuanced verdicts on different parts of the election separately. In doing so, they tend not to give an overall verdict on election quality, and most missions now avoid using binary judgments like 'free and fair'. If reporting on these statements, care should be taken to accurately reflect this.
- At this time, EOMs are often prepared to offer you additional access, such as a one-to-one interview with the Head of Mission/Chief Observer.
- Increasingly, EOMs are prepared to communicate in local languages, so it may be possible to request translations of the statements.

These tips were prepared by Thomas Molony and Robert Macdonald. Contact Thomas.Molony@ed.ac.uk. For more information about the UKRI-funded 'Local Perceptions and Media Representations of Election Observation in Africa' project, including a working paper with preliminary findings on how the media represents EOMs, see: <https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/lmeo>.