

Public opinion and the news media

During elections the news media, both as a corporate citizen and as the conveyor of events, happenings and decisions to the masses, is called upon to exercise more care and responsibility than at any other time. An innocent looking news article could spell doom for a political party or a leader.



By FRANK SENGE KOLMA

THE EXCITEMENT of national elections is as electrifying as it is infectious. The sensation is heady for some and can go to the head for others. Yet a national general election is democracy's central pillar, the one event at which the 4.2 million people of Papua New Guinea have a say in government. This is done when the people decide who is to enter Parliament and make laws, rules, regulations and policies regulating their lives and charting the course for their future.

It is a time when every citizen is called upon to exercise great responsibility, caution and fairness.

It is also a time when personal and public reputations are dragged out and paraded for all to view.

The news media, both as a corporate citizen and as the conveyor of events, happenings and decisions to the masses, is called upon to exercise more care and responsibility than at any other time. That is so because an innocent looking news article could spell doom for a political party or a leader. Be sure that any political story, however true for one side will always appear to the opposing camp as propaganda. A reporter's personal, cultural and educational bias can get into a story inadvertently. The wrong headline can give a totally different meaning to an otherwise straightforward story. A photograph can tell its own

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tale of political associations, differing moods and editorial bias. And advertisements are not sacrosanct in any medium just because someone pays for it to be used.

The news media's duty to the public remains paramount at this time — to portray precisely what is happening without unnecessary innuendo, biases or diversions to enable the citizen to make an informed decision when s/he casts her/his vote.

Although we might say that our bigger duty is to the voter, it does not mean we neglect the leaders. Whether good or bad they are the decision makers who decide our future and deserve careful consideration.

As the election draws near, politicians do not watch what they say, but they do watch very carefully how it is reported in the mass media. It is not uncommon for a person to even deny having said anything. It is therefore important that politicians and the media have a common understanding of each other's roles. It is my view that sometimes politicians do not understand nor appreciate the role of the media. Often, rather than help[the politician understand, the media spurns him and this leads dramatic misunderstandings such as legislating against the media. So much time would be saved if some were invested helping he politician and indeed the public understand the roles and responsibilities of the media and its important position in any democracy.

Certain minimum codes of conduct and regulations must be set that is known and appreciated by both parties.

The National has decided to set these standards by way of outlining a set of guidelines for political reporting. Before I discuss the guidelines, it is appropriate to discuss what I believe to be the broad philosophy and mission of media organisations so that the guidelines are seen in the context of our wider responsibility to this developing Melanesian state. I stress developing and Melanesian nation, as some of the views expressed at this seminar may not necessarily be the same if this were another place and another time.

Philosophy:

Truth and justice being interpretive these days the media should always strive to build on the good and the positive, to be fair and balanced, to give hope to all people that there is a better tomorrow and to help bring those hopes to reality.

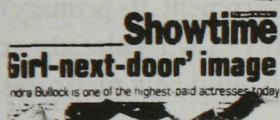
The community responsibility:

The mass media is an integral part of the world. It will strive to be community conscious. There can be no newspaper if there is no reader.

1. Any news organisation is a part of systems, man-made and natural. Only when the elements and the man-made systems work in harmony with each other

We grow in your hands

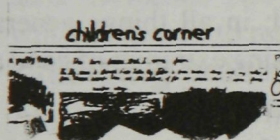
In the hands of our readers, The National continues to grow...in size and in content. Every day your favourite newspaper comes in several sections so there is something for everyone in the family.



Mondays: The Showtime liftout detailing TV programmes and goings-on with your popular stars



Tuesdays: A Property section reporting the real estate market and building projects. A comprehensive For Sale and For Rent listing to help those who are looking for a home



Wednesdays: The Children's Corner showcases the talent of our young readers. Even our adult readers find the children's contributions a joy to read. Some teachers use them as supplementary teaching aids.



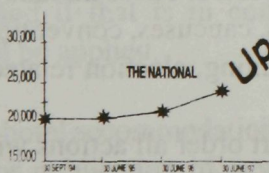
Thursdays: This is the day when our women readers have their say. National Woman reflects the concerns, aspirations and achievements of our women folk



Fridays: The Weekender Magazine that comes with the paper is a hit with our readers. It's made for weekend reading, and there are puzzles and word games to challenge the mind.

Add to these the main newspaper that brings you your daily news at Home, in the Region and World around us and Sports and Business. The result is a neat and colourful package in your hands.

And the same hands are taking The National to new heights. We have not stopped growing since our birth nearly four years ago. We are the fastest growing paper in Papua New Guinea. Thank you for your support.



Up, up and up ...

**THAT'S
MY NATIONAL
PAPER!**

The National

The National ... fast-growing and influential.

can there be peace, harmony, progress and hope for a better tomorrow on earth.

2. Such news organisations must respect human dignity and the dignity and rightful place for all of creation. Never by the actions of a news organisation must we intentionally destroy or detract from any individual or from the world we are a part of without adding to it to make it better than its previous state.

3. The media, as a human institution, is an essential tool, a vital link in the chain of our evolving society.

In a developing nation, the media's national building task is as important as, if not more so, than its task of being a watchdog on Government. Its primary task is to build, to add to and enhance the beauty and quality of what already exists and to provide the medium for a collection of ideas to build new platforms for a better future.

4. Towards that end, all media outlets ought to be biased towards fairness, harmony, stability, organisation and balance. Nothing is absolute. In all things generally perceived to be bad, there is some good; in all things generally perceived as good, there is some bad. Rather than seeking extremes of good and bad, the role of the media should be to strive for balance.

Types of news

Treatment of political news can be ranked into five areas. There are firstly, the current happenings which we refer to here as Actions, there are the Words, there are the backgrounders — the features, analysis, profiles and commentaries. Photographs are a fourth item of news and lastly, there are paid advertisements.

Actions: As a basic guide all current happenings and decisions involving an individual or political entity which will affect the lives of a wide cross section of the community will and must be reported. These include Parliament sittings, cabinet, court or Parliament decisions, caucuses, conventions, illnesses affecting prominent leaders, political infighting, election related violence, shifting political affiliations and so on.

Unless there is privilege or a court order all actions will be reported.

Words: Words which cover parliamentary debates, media statements, claims, allegations either in documentary or verbal form will be reported carefully.



Political guidelines

ADDITIONAL guidelines that *The National* set for its reporters to follow in coverage of political stories during the June general election.

Jurisdiction:

The National will not publish in its news columns comments by politicians about an area that is outside of his or her jurisdiction. That means that no Member of Parliament would be recognised as making a newsworthy statement if he were to make claims about an electorate other than his own or about a ministry other than his own. He can, however, reply to criticisms or claims against him by somebody who has jurisdiction. That rule will be applied less stringently in letters and advertisements. The Prime Minister and the alternate Prime Minister will be allowed to make wide-ranging comments on all issues.

Changing political affiliations:

Any Member of Parliament who claims he has shifted allegiances must be able to confirm that he has done so in the presence of the new party leader. He must provide documentary evidence that he has actually signed up with the new party. He must provide a fairly detailed brief as to why he is moving from one party to the other.

Personal attacks and allegations:

All claims which names an individual will not be published until the opinion of the person named has been sought.

Trips:

All trips offered by political parties will be approved by the editor. Anybody making an unauthorised trip will be seen to be making a personal trip and if that is in company time the right disciplinary procedures will be applied.

Gifts:

Offers of cash, hotel accommodation, dinners, drinks and any other gifts in exchange for publication of news items or anything else must be reported to the editor immediately. If it is not and the editor learns of it, company will take it as a serious breach of ethics and as misconduct.

Continued overleaf

NATIONAL GUIDELINES *From previous page*

Requesting favours:

No journalist or photographer or any other person working for this organisation can likewise make a request for any favours in exchange for publication of news items, photographs or anything else.

Selling information:

No item of news gathered by an employee of this company can be given, sold or published in any other medium before *The National*, the breach of which will be viewed as a serious breach of discipline, ethics and terms and conditions of employment.

Biased reports:

No news item should be deliberately written to misconstrue the actual situation, be biased, carry untruths or be slanted in favour of or against any individual, group or community. Proof of this will mean very serious disciplinary charges. To avoid inadvertent slants, people who are too involved in a story or with a group must declare to the editor that they have been so involved in order that the job is reassigned or the finished story is screened closely.

All journalists should know and adhere to the journalists code of ethics and to apply those in their work.

The above are general guides. The editor may, in his absolute discretion, vary these rules in special circumstances.

Features: Features, analysis, commentaries, profiles and interviews will also be run if they satisfy the general rules of fair comment, public interest and are not grossly misleading or against public decency.

Advertisements: No advertisement will be run that is unfair, untrue, is designed to raise public hatred or stir unrest in the community or clearly defames any person, institution or community.

Photographs: All above rules apply to photographs.

Frank Senge Kolma is Editor of The National. He presented this paper at the 'Ombudsman Commission and the Media: Transparency and Accountability' seminar in Port Moresby on 14 May 1997.