Module 4: Assessing media coverage and identifying imbalances

Training material to be shared with trainers only

CONTENTS

TRAINER OVERVIEW 2

PREPARATION AND ROUTE SELECTION 3

ASKING THE RIGHT MONITORING QUESTION 4

DESIGNING A WORKABLE SAMPLE 5

BUILDING A TRANSPARENT SAMPLING PLAN 6

CODING COVERAGE CONSISTENTLY 7

CODING EXERCISE AND RELIABILITY CHECK 9

INTERPRETING QUANTITIES AND QUALITY 10

MONITORING SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE CAMPAIGNING 11

REPORTING FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 13

COMPARING RECENT ELECTION EXPERIENCES 15

CHECKING LEARNING AND NEXT STEPS 15

TRAINING OF TRAINERS' GUIDANCE AND ASSESSMENT 17

AUDIENCE ADAPTATION 17

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING 18

This module enables participants to turn recorded election communication into credible, useful findings. It follows the monitoring process from defining a question and selecting sources to coding content, checking results and reporting what the evidence supports. Its central concern is the quality of the assessment, not simply the amount of data collected.

Use the separate participant workbook for the exercises. Keep this document, including worked calculations and suggested conclusions, with trainers until the activities are complete. The activities can be delivered without PowerPoint slides, specialist software or internet access.

Broadcasting, print, online journalism, political accounts and platform distribution belong in the assessment, but they require different measures and sampling decisions. An airtime share, a number of posts and a view count are not interchangeable measures of influence.

Trainer overview

Module objective

Enable participants to design and apply a transparent monitoring approach, identify possible imbalances across traditional and digital media, and communicate findings with appropriate evidence, context and limits. Participants should be able to distinguish a measured difference from an editorial concern, a potential legal violation and a claim about electoral impact.

Learning outcomes

- Define a monitoring question, relevant standard, population, sample, period and unit of analysis.
- Combine quantitative measures with qualitative assessment of content, presentation, sources and context.
- Apply clear coding rules for actors, official and campaign roles, direct speech and tone, and resolve disagreements through a documented reliability check.
- Calculate coverage shares using explicit denominators and recognise how missing content, genre and actor categories affect interpretation.
- Design a social-media assessment that examines narratives and indicators of possible manipulation or coordinated behaviour, while distinguishing observed signals from proven disinformation, bots or trolls.
- Produce a concise, evidence-backed finding and a feasible recommendation addressed to an actor with the relevant responsibility.

Session techniques and methods

Small-group sampling workshop; individual coding followed by paired comparison; calculation and interpretation clinic; social-media data and behaviour audit; rewriting an overclaimed finding; short election-case comparison; individual exit task. A short quiz or energiser can reactivate the coding rules before the exercise. Offer printed data, calculators and seated discussion as alternatives to online tools and movement.

Duration

Standard route: 120 minutes. Condensed route: 90 minutes. Extended route: 180 minutes. These include instructions, participant work, reporting back and debriefs, but exclude breaks, preparation and translation. The extra time compared with a short introductory module is reserved for practical coding and interpretation. Select a route rather than attempting to deliver all the guidance verbatim.

Standards and scope

Use CM/Rec(2022)12 as the contemporary Council of Europe framework, alongside CM/Rec(2007)15 and applicable national rules. Freedom of expression, editorial independence, pluralism and fair electoral opportunities guide the questions; monitoring supplies evidence for assessing them.

Recommendations are not interchangeable with binding law. Identify the relevant obligation before alleging a violation. [1–3]

Module 3 explains fairness and pluralism; this module tests how to assess them. Detailed manipulation analysis belongs in Module 5, platform and advertising obligations in Module 6, and protection and inclusion in Module 7. Monitoring should still record relevant indicators and refer them for appropriate follow-up.

Preparation and route selection

Trainer checklist

- Review the local media environment, languages, platform use, ownership and access barriers. Consult relevant media outlets and journalists' associations, NGOs and domestic or international observers, as well as competent authorities. Record their claims as stakeholder information until independently verified. Ask which groups and regions an exclusively national or online sample would miss.
- Confirm participants' mandates. Provide current national provisions for any legal assessment; do not assume observers, EMBs and regulators have the same powers.
- Print Sheets 1–6 and keep answers in this guidance. Use Sheet 7 as a reusable field form. All exercise figures and fictional outlets are training data, not findings about a real election.
- Prepare a clock, calculator and board. For experienced groups, substitute a short, cleared local recording with a verified transcript and timestamps; retain the same coding rules and debrief.
- Explain how politically sensitive material will be handled. Avoid exposing personal data, reproducing harassment or asking participants to enter closed groups.
- Allocate groups of three to five and rotate the reporter. Start coding individually so that senior participants do not determine everybody's first answer.

Route table

Session	90 min	120 min	180 min
1 Monitoring question	10	10	10
2 Sample design	15	20	25
3 Coding and reliability	20	25	35
4 Interpretation	15	20	30
5 Social-media evidence audit	15	20	25
6 Reporting and recommendations	10	15	20
7 Recent election comparison	0	5	20
8 Learning check	5	5	15

For 90 minutes, provide the sample inventory and coding rules as advance reading, code only Items 1 and 3 on Sheet 2, and hear one report per exercise. For 120 minutes, code all four items and compare two reports. For 180 minutes, add a second independent coding round, a revised sampling plan and the full comparison exercise. Do not remove the reliability or interpretation debriefs to save time.

Core messages that should remain constant

- Collect evidence that answers a stated question. More observations do not repair a poorly defined sample or unclear coding rule.
- Quantity and quality must be read together. High visibility may consist of criticism; negative coverage may be accurate, relevant journalism.
- News is not expected to be neutral. Monitoring assesses how media outlets select and present political actors; it does not assess whether the monitored actors themselves are worthy, truthful or popular.
- Tone should consider both content and context. What is said and how it is presented may reinforce or pull against each other; where they differ, apply the declared prevailing-factor rule and record the basis.
- Keep outlet-level and format-level results visible. Aggregating opposing editorial patterns can conceal an imbalance within an outlet.
- Airtime monitoring and social-media monitoring answer different questions. Airtime and direct speech help reveal visibility and treatment in editorial coverage. Social-media assessment examines narratives, account and network behaviour, paid or coordinated amplification and possible manipulation, using evidence appropriate to each claim.
- Public metrics remain useful but incomplete. A repeated narrative or unusual activity pattern may justify further inquiry; neither alone proves disinformation, a bot network, a troll operation or platform intent.
- Content analysis describes communication. It does not, by itself, establish how many voters encountered it, whether they believed it, or how they voted.
- Findings should be reproducible, timely and proportionate to the evidence. Preserve uncertainty and give affected actors a fair opportunity to respond.

Asking the right monitoring question

SESSION METHOD Question sorting and short discussion | TIME 10 minutes

Guidance for trainers

Present three questions: “How much news coverage did each contestant receive?”, “Did an outlet treat comparable contestants fairly?” and “Did online campaigning change the result?” Ask what evidence each would require. Spend three minutes on individual answers, four comparing them and three clarifying the boundaries.

The first question needs a defined body of content and consistent measurement. The second also needs standards, qualitative evidence and context. The third needs additional research capable of addressing exposure and causation; content counts alone cannot answer it. Do not allow the monitoring question to expand silently as findings become politically interesting.

As an alternative energiser for experienced groups, use four quick statements: “More airtime always means more favourable treatment”; “Direct speech is additional to total actor coverage”; “Repeated posts prove the accounts are bots”; and “Every false claim is disinformation”. Ask participants to vote before explaining why all four are incorrect under this module’s definitions.

A practical sequence

Define the question and standard; select sources and period; record and code; check consistency and completeness; interpret in context; report and recommend.

At each stage, record decisions so that another analyst can understand how a conclusion was reached. Monitoring can inform a newsroom’s self-assessment, an observation report, voter-

information improvements or a regulatory inquiry. Its evidential requirements and institutional consequences differ with the purpose.

What the wider assessment adds

Interview relevant stakeholders and review ownership, media freedom, journalists' safety, access to information and complaints. Separate independently observed facts from interviewees' allegations. Monitoring output alone cannot reveal every pressure affecting editorial decisions; interviews alone cannot establish the pattern of coverage.

Internal pluralism concerns the range of voices within a service. External pluralism concerns diversity across independent sources. Examine both without claiming that opposing partisan outlets automatically make each outlet's conduct fair. Online, the diversity of available sources is not evidence of what individual users actually see.

Designing a workable sample

SESSION METHOD Sampling workshop using Sheet 1 | TIME 15, 20 or 25 minutes

Guidance for trainers

Give groups five minutes to identify their question, five to choose sources and periods, and five to defend one inclusion and one exclusion. In the standard route, add five minutes to revise the plan after another group challenges it. In the extended route, add a further five minutes on language or regional coverage.

There is no single correct sample. Assess whether the selection answers the question, captures relevant diversity and fits the resources. Ask what the group will stop doing if a new platform or outlet is added. An unmanageable promise to monitor everything is not a stronger design.

Building a transparent sampling plan

Decisions to document

Decision	What the plan should specify
Purpose and population	The communication to be assessed, election type, geographical scope and intended use of findings.
Sources	Selection criteria such as audience relevance, ownership, public or private status, political orientation, language, region and accessibility; identify gaps in audience evidence.
Period and frequency	Dates, time slots, weekdays and weekends, campaign phases and any pre-campaign baseline. State whether the sample is continuous, periodic or event-based.
Formats	News, current affairs, debates, designated access, advertising and voter information kept identifiable; include online formats where relevant.
Online accounts	Inclusion criteria and a dated account list distinguishing editorial outlets, contestants, institutions and other influential actors. Specify whether the task concerns narratives, advertising, engagement, harmful content or behavioural indicators.
Units and measures	Items and actor segments; seconds for broadcast, centimetres squared for print, and words, pixels or screen area for fixed online pages where appropriate; posts, ads and collection timestamps. Explain any overlapping actor references.
Missing material	A capture log, reasons for gaps, attempts to recover content, and how missingness affects the findings.
Capacity and quality control	Recording, coding, supervision, language competence, secure storage and time reserved for checking and reporting.

Sampling choices to explain

A purposive sample selects sources for stated reasons, such as influence and diversity. It does not automatically support a statistical estimate of all media output. A probability sample requires a defined sampling frame and selection procedure. Do not label a convenience list “representative” because it is large.

Prioritise politically significant and influential contestants when resources are limited, but state the criteria and retain a defensible way to capture smaller or emerging contestants. Explain sparse coverage of underdogs rather than treating their absence from the sample or results as self-explanatory.

Use the same collection rules for comparable actors. Keep unexpected incidents in a separate incident log so that complaint-driven discoveries do not silently change the fixed sample. If the design changes, date the revision, explain why and show its effect on comparability.

As a practical rule of thumb, allow at least two weeks of monitoring before describing stable campaign tendencies. Treat this as a minimum field benchmark, not permission to ignore sample intensity, campaign length, missing days or sudden events; shorter periods support only narrower findings.

Print can be measured in centimetres squared and online pages in words, pixels or screen area where a fixed, archived layout permits a consistent comparison. Retain headline size, images and placement as qualitative prominence information. Pixel measurements are not comparable across responsive layouts, devices or personalised feeds. A website snapshot requires a collection time; it is not a record of all versions published that day.

Sheet 1 debrief

The fictional budget supports 24 recorded broadcast hours. Four 30-minute bulletins over 12 days meet that ceiling, but leave no broadcast capacity for radio or debates. A justified alternative might redistribute days or slots to include local radio. Either choice must disclose what is excluded and avoid claiming comprehensive national coverage. The separate online ceiling is six accounts; their role and language mix matter as much as their number.

Ask whether coding time has also been budgeted: 24 hours of recordings usually requires more than 24 hours of staff work once logging, review and reporting are included. No fixed universal processing ratio is assumed.

Coding coverage consistently

SESSION METHOD Individual coding and paired comparison using Sheet 2 | TIME 20, 25 or 35 minutes

Minimum coding rules

Explain the codebook before participants see the answer key. A coding unit must be small enough to apply the rule consistently but large enough to preserve meaning. Record both what was said and how it was presented. [3–6]

Field	Operational rule for this exercise
Source and item	Record outlet or account, date, programme or format, item identifier, location and timecode or URL.
Actor and role	Identify the person or organisation and the capacity shown: official, contestant, party representative or other. Do not automatically assign every ministerial activity to the governing party.
Attributed duration	Seconds in which the actor is speaking or is the identifiable subject of coverage. Count each second once per actor. One interval may concern more than one actor; disclose this if totals are actor-seconds rather than programme duration.
Direct coverage	The actor’s own recorded voice. It is a subset of that actor’s total coverage, not an additional quantity to add to it. Written quotation is coded separately in text-based monitoring.
Indirect coverage	Coverage in which the actor is the identifiable subject but does not speak directly. Under this exercise, direct plus indirect time equals the actor’s attributed duration.

Field	Operational rule for this exercise
Tone of content	Positive: favourable evaluation; negative: adverse evaluation; neutral: factual wording without a clear evaluative direction. Judge the wording about the actor, not the actor's own claim or your opinion of it.
Tone of context	Assess images, camera treatment, sound, captions, editing, juxtaposition, headline and presenter cues. Do not infer a contextual tone from a transcript that does not supply it.
Speaker and target	Identify who makes an evaluation and whom it concerns. A critic speaking about another actor is not automatically portrayed negatively themselves.
Uncertainty	Flag unclear role, reference or tone for review. Split separable positive and negative segments; do not silently call mixed or unresolved material neutral.

Guidance for trainers

Allow five minutes to explain the rules, five for individual coding, five for paired comparison and five for debrief. In the standard route, add five minutes to resolve Items 2 and 4. In the extended route, add ten minutes for independent re-coding and a documented rule revision.

Named tone categories prevent confusion between older training materials that use opposite numeric scales. If software requires numbers, provide an explicit lookup table and check imported data before combining datasets.

Tone matrix

Content and context combination	Final coding rule
Same direction	Code the shared positive, neutral or negative direction and retain the basis.
Different directions	Determine which factor prevails in the overall portrayal, record the final tone and explain the decision. If neither prevails, flag the item for review rather than silently coding it neutral.
Content assessable; context unavailable	Code the content tone and mark the contextual assessment as unavailable.
Content unclear; context assessable	Code only if the codebook permits context to prevail; otherwise refer for review.

Beyond the minimum fields

Depending on the question, add issue, genre, prominence, sources consulted, opportunity to respond, paid or editorial status, language and accessibility. Gender and other inclusion variables

need a clear purpose and appropriate evidence; do not infer sensitive characteristics from a name or appearance. More fields increase training and checking requirements.

Coding exercise and reliability check

Suggested answers for Sheet 2

Item 1: the minister appears in an official capacity for 30 seconds, including 10 seconds of direct and 20 seconds of indirect coverage. The wording is neutral, while the supplied celebratory visuals create a positive context. Participants should apply the prevailing-factor rule, record their basis and refer a genuinely unresolved result for review. Do not recode it as campaign activity solely because an election is approaching.

Item 2: Candidate A is attributed 20 seconds: 10 direct and 10 indirect. The introduction and flattering montage are positive; the direct statement is neutral in content. Code the separable segments and retain the content/context basis. The candidate's voice is not automatically positive merely because it offers publicity.

Item 3: Candidate B receives 20 seconds of indirect coverage and no direct coverage. Both the adverse wording and the supplied red warning graphic are negative in tone. The independent audit may justify the reporting; the tone code does not decide accuracy, bias or illegality. The extract does not establish whether B was asked to respond elsewhere.

Item 4: the first 10 seconds concern a minister's official activity; the next 10 contain an explicit appeal to vote for Party A. Split the roles and record 10 seconds of official direct coverage and 10 of campaign direct coverage, with no indirect time in either segment. Under the exercise's evaluation-based content rule, both segments are neutral; contextual tone is unavailable.

Reliability check

Compare codes before discussion. Record which fields agree, which differ and why. For example, if two coders agree on 8 of 10 tone decisions, raw agreement is 80 per cent. This is a diagnostic, not proof that the codebook is valid: agreement may reflect a dominant neutral category, shared misunderstanding or easy test material.

Revise ambiguous definitions using difficult examples, then test fresh material independently. For a substantial monitoring operation, assess agreement separately for important fields; a chance-corrected measure may be appropriate for categorical codes, alongside disagreement patterns. Check timing consistency separately. Set a review procedure before full coding, and retain original and adjudicated records.

Supervisors should inspect the database periodically during collection, not only at the end. Check permitted values, duplicate records, impossible durations, missing identifiers, direct time exceeding total time and unexpected changes by coder or day. Correct the process as well as the individual record, and document material changes to the codebook.

Common traps to discuss

- Assigning the speaker's criticism to the wrong target.
- Counting a direct statement twice, once as direct and again as additional coverage.
- Treating official and campaign activity as automatically identical, or ignoring an explicit campaign appeal during an official event.
- Using negative tone as a synonym for unfair journalism.
- Inferring sarcasm, visual framing or bias from a transcript when the recording has not been examined.

What a qualitative log adds

Keep the relevant quotation or description, context, timecode, actor, issue and reason for concern. Note camera treatment, headlines, thumbnails, editing, misleading juxtaposition or missing relevant perspectives where observable. Verify an alleged omission against a documented event and the outlet's remit and sample, not simply another outlet's decision to cover it. Distinguish observed presentation from a claim about the editor's intention or the audience's response.

Interpreting quantities and quality

SESSION METHOD Calculation and interpretation clinic using Sheet 3 | TIME 15, 20 or 30 minutes

Guidance for trainers

Allow five minutes for calculations, five for interpreting the apparent imbalance and five for debrief. In the standard route, add five minutes to compare alternative denominators. In the extended route, add ten minutes to design the additional evidence needed before reaching a stronger conclusion.

Begin with the denominator, not the chart. Ask participants to label the outlet, period, format, actor categories, units and missing material before describing a result. Distinguish a share of actor coverage from a share of total news time.

Worked results for Sheet 3

The dataset contains 600 actor-seconds: government in official capacity 180, Party A 120, Party B 180 and Party C 120. Shares of all listed actor coverage are respectively 30, 20, 30 and 20 per cent. These are not shares of the 360 minutes of recorded news.

Excluding official government coverage gives a contestant denominator of 420 seconds. A receives 28.6 per cent, B 42.9 per cent and C 28.6 per cent, rounded to one decimal. The rounded figures total 100.1 per cent; disclose rounding rather than altering a category without explanation.

Direct speech as a proportion of each actor's own coverage is: government 66.7 per cent, A 50 per cent, B 16.7 per cent and C 50 per cent. B has the most contestant coverage, but 120 of its 180 seconds are negative and only 30 seconds are direct speech. The numbers justify closer examination of treatment, not an automatic finding of unfairness.

Indirect coverage is total attributed coverage minus direct coverage: government 60 seconds, A 60, B 150 and C 60. Direct and indirect figures should be cross-tabulated with tone and role rather than treated as independent signs of fairness.

Government coverage plus A totals 300 seconds, or 50 per cent of all listed actor coverage. This can be presented as a clearly labelled supplementary calculation to explore incumbency visibility; it must not replace the distinction between official and campaign activity or imply that every official item was party promotion.

Questions before drawing a conclusion

- Were comparable events treated differently? Was negative coverage supported by evidence, contextualised and accompanied by a reasonable opportunity to respond?
- Did contestants decline invitations, fail to hold events or receive exposure in other relevant formats? Do not assume any explanation without checking it.
- Were timing, placement, interviewer conduct, repeated clips or access conditions materially different?
- Could two missing bulletins change the pattern? Their contents are unknown, not zero.
- What obligations apply to this outlet and genre? Is this an editorial concern, a potential breach requiring inquiry, or insufficient evidence for either?

Trainer emphasis

The 12 recorded bulletins are a defined sample, not the whole campaign. Report each outlet and genre separately before any justified aggregation. Do not add percentages with different denominators or average them without explaining weights. A striking graph must not hide a small dataset, uncertainty or missing content.

Use cross-tabulation: examine time together with direct and indirect coverage, tone, role, outlet, genre and period instead of drawing conclusions from one indicator. The purpose is to see whether indicators reinforce or qualify each other, not to generate every possible table.

Check, double-check and triple-check important figures and quotations. Avoid categorical statements unless the evidence fully supports them. Remove indicators that the team cannot define, collect reliably or use in analysis; unused fields create work and error without strengthening the conclusion.

Monitoring social media and online campaigning

SESSION METHOD Data and behaviour audit using Sheets 4A and 4B | TIME 15, 20 or 25 minutes

Guidance for trainers

In the 90-minute route, use Sheet 4A only: five minutes to identify data problems, five to decide what can be reported and five to debrief. In the 120-minute route, spend eight minutes on Sheet 4A, eight on Sheet 4B and four on a joint debrief. In the extended route, allow ten minutes for each sheet and five minutes to draft an evidence-preservation and escalation plan. Use the same standards of transparency and verification as broadcast monitoring while changing the units, research questions and limits. [4, 7]

Two related but distinct forms of assessment

Traditional media monitoring measures how editorial outlets allocate and present coverage. Airtime, direct speech, tone, genre and prominence help identify patterns of visibility and treatment. These measures remain relevant to online editorial news and video, but they cannot simply be transferred to personalised social-media feeds.

Social-media monitoring can quantify public posts, advertisements and observable interactions, but its principal added value lies in examining narratives and how they travel, possible false or manipulated content, coordinated amplification and signs that accounts misrepresent who controls them or how popular a message is. The analysis may also document harassment or other harmful speech for referral to the relevant module and authority.

Keep four conclusions separate. A narrative is a recurring interpretation or claim, not necessarily false. A false claim is not automatically disinformation because disinformation requires evidence of deliberate deception. Coordination can be genuine collective campaigning or covert manipulation. Automation, fabricated identities and organised trolling require stronger evidence than rapid or repetitive posting alone.

Separate the questions

Object of monitoring	Evidence and limits
Online editorial output	Articles, headlines, clips, sources, actor treatment and editorial placement; retain versions and capture times where feasible.

Object of monitoring	Evidence and limits
Public political accounts	Posts, narratives, formats, actor references and publication patterns; advocacy by a contestant is not assessed as if it were public-service news.
Public institutional accounts	Voter information, official announcements, partisan appeals and possible resource use; distinguish an observed post from a proven legal violation.
Advertising	Available sponsor, creative, dates, spending or delivery information; record gaps, estimates and the source of each field. An ad repository is not automatically a complete record.
Public engagement	Observable reactions, comments and shares under a stated definition; these are actions, not unique people, votes or necessarily support.
Distribution and moderation	Documented recommendations, restrictions, notices or platform data; an observer's feed or high view count cannot establish system-wide algorithmic preference.
Possible coordinated or inauthentic behaviour	Timing, repeated text, shared links, account creation, cross-posting and amplification patterns. Treat these as indicators for further inquiry, not automatic proof of bots, trolls or common control.

Sheet 4A debrief

Six rows contain five unique post identifiers because A1 is duplicated. There are four unique contestant posts, but only three have an observed interaction count. A2 was captured after 24 hours, while A1 and B1 were captured after 72 hours. Their counts should not be presented as a like-for-like party performance comparison.

The absent count for B2 is missing, not zero. Record its unavailability and the collection limits; do not assume it was deleted or infer why it became unavailable. I1 belongs to a public institution and must remain a distinct category. Obtain content and context before deciding whether it is routine information or campaigning.

Collection safeguards

Define interaction components, capture age and collection frequency before monitoring. Preserve the post identifier, account, publication and capture time, content evidence and any known sponsored status. De-duplicate repeated captures without losing the time series. Keep posts, ads and cross-posted material identifiable; do not assume the same content on two services reached different people.

Automated classification, translation and sentiment tools require testing against human-coded material in the relevant language and context. Record their limitations and review contested classifications. Use authorised access, minimise personal data and restrict storage and sharing. Do not promise access to private messaging, complete targeting data or every deleted post.

Social-media narratives and behaviour

Sheet 4B debrief

The fictional pattern supports three limited observations: 12 accounts posted the same claim and link within eight minutes; eight of those accounts were recently created and used generic profile images; and repetitive comments appeared in short bursts under three news articles. These facts justify a hypothesis of possible coordination or artificial amplification. They do not establish who controlled the accounts, whether software posted the material, or whether any participant was a paid troll.

Code the narrative separately from the behaviour. Record the claim about ballot scanners, its variants, source links, language, target and time. Verify the claim against election procedures, technical evidence and other reliable sources. Until falsity and deceptive intent are supported, report it as an unverified claim or narrative rather than declaring "disinformation".

The four established activists who later shared the story in their own words should not automatically join the suspicious cluster. Their posts may show diffusion of the narrative rather than common control. Look for transparent affiliation, independent commentary and temporal sequence. Preserve alternative explanations and note what platform or investigative data would be needed.

Evidence ladder for behavioural claims

Claim	Minimum support before reporting
Recurring narrative	A defined sample of posts with recorded text or media, dates, account roles and a transparent grouping rule.
False or manipulated content	Verification against reliable primary or expert evidence, with the exact false element identified.
Possible coordination	Repeated and temporally linked behaviour across accounts, tested against plausible genuine campaign organisation.
Coordinated inauthentic behaviour	Evidence of both coordination and deception about identity, origin or popularity; use a platform or investigator's finding where available.
Bot or automated account	Reliable technical or platform evidence of automation. High posting frequency alone is insufficient.
Troll or organised trolling	Evidence about organised deceptive participation or control. Hostile language or disagreement alone is insufficient.

Safe documentation and referral

Preserve URLs or identifiers, timestamps, public content, screenshots or archives where lawful, and a record of verification steps. Separate raw evidence from analytical coding. Avoid publishing personal data or naming a private individual as a bot or troll on behavioural indicators alone. Record referrals and decisions by the competent platform, regulator, election authority or law-enforcement body without treating a referral as a confirmed violation.

Reporting findings and recommendations

SESSION METHOD Rewrite and peer review using Sheet 5 | TIME 10, 15 or 20 minutes

Guidance for trainers

Use four minutes to rewrite the statement, three to compare drafts and three for feedback. Add five minutes in the standard route for a recommendation. Add five more in the extended route for a response from the actor addressed. Participants should produce a usable paragraph, not only identify flaws.

Suggested replacement finding

"Across 12 recorded evening bulletins of Public TV during the 14-day monitoring period, Party B received 42.9 per cent of coverage devoted to the three contestants. Two thirds of B's coverage was negative in tone, and direct speech accounted for 16.7 per cent of its coverage. These differences warrant qualitative review, including the subject matter and opportunities to respond. Two scheduled bulletins were not recorded, and the findings do not describe the outlet's entire campaign output."

This is a finding about the fictional dataset. It neither proves an election-law breach nor establishes an effect on voting. The separate social-media exercises cannot substantiate platform favouritism or prove a bot or troll operation.

From evidence to a recommendation

Separate observation, interpretation, applicable standard and proposed action. State who should do what, why it addresses the documented problem and what safeguard or follow-up is needed. Do not recommend an equal-time sanction solely from a tone table.

For this exercise, a defensible immediate step is for the monitoring team to recover the missing bulletins where possible, review B's negative items and request the newsroom's explanation before finalising an assessment of treatment. If a concern remains, the next action depends on the verified facts, applicable rules and the recipient's mandate.

Audience	Appropriate use of the finding
Regulator or supervisory authority	Assess whether there is a basis for an inquiry; identify jurisdiction, evidence, response rights and a proportionate process.
Election management body	Review voter-information implications and matters within its mandate; refer other concerns to the competent body.
Legal professionals and policymakers	Test the evidential basis and legal threshold; distinguish advice, judicial review and possible rule reform.
Journalists and media practitioners	Audit editorial choices, context and response opportunities; verify circulating narratives and explain or correct problems while preserving independence.
Civil society, NGOs and observers	Publish a scoped assessment, disclose methods and limits, preserve evidence of possible manipulation and advocate improvements without claiming enforcement powers.

Reporting checklist

Name the sample and period; show units and denominators; use relevant cross-tabulations; explain missingness and coding; distinguish allegations from verified facts; include relevant responses; use clear tables with source notes; publish while findings can still be useful; correct errors visibly. Check, double-check and triple-check important figures, avoid categorical statements unless fully

supported, and drop indicators that will not be used. Preserve a secure evidence trail sufficient to reproduce the assessment without exposing unnecessary personal data. [3–6]

Comparing recent election experiences

SESSION METHOD Evidence comparison using Sheet 6 | TIME Optional 5 or 20 minutes

Guidance for trainers

For the five-minute route, use the Georgia case: two minutes to read, two to answer and one to summarise. For the extended route, assign different cases to three groups, allow eight minutes for analysis, six for reporting and six for comparison. The figures are attributed observation findings, not training-generated estimates.

Georgia parliamentary elections 2024

ODIHR monitored six television stations and two online outlets from 18 September to 25 October. Formula allocated 56 per cent of its campaign news coverage to Georgian Dream, but 89 per cent of that party's coverage was negative. The report also noted that the regulator did not publish monitoring conclusions before election day. [8]

Ask why visibility alone is an inadequate proxy for favourable treatment and why the timing of publication matters. The tone figures do not independently establish whether individual critical stories were justified. Use this case to link quantity, quality and the usefulness of timely reporting, not to reproduce every legal dispute from the election.

Serbia local elections 2024

ODIHR reported approximately one million interactions with the Facebook and X accounts of eight actors from the ruling SNS, compared with 228,000 for the accounts of the 12 most prominent opposition actors, between 1 May and election day. [9]

Ask participants to identify what would be needed to compare activity fairly: account selection, number of posts, capture timing, definitions, paid promotion and duplication. These totals do not identify unique users, approval, voting behaviour or the causes of the difference. Keep this distinction even if the contrast is politically striking.

Bosnia and Herzegovina local elections 2024

ODIHR's online assessment covered 63 political actors, of whom 46 were active on the monitored services. It did not identify systematic dissemination of hate speech or disinformation in that sample, while noting some inflammatory rhetoric. [10]

Ask what the finding can and cannot say about the wider online campaign, including unmonitored accounts and services. The lesson is to preserve the sample boundary when reporting an absence; it is not a certification that harmful content was absent everywhere.

Debrief

The cases illuminate different limits: amount versus treatment, interactions versus audience response, and sampled observations versus the whole environment. Require participants to state the source, election, period where provided, and limits before using a figure. Do not rank countries on these differently constructed datasets.

Checking learning and next steps

SESSION METHOD Individual exit task | TIME 5 or 15 minutes

Ask each participant to write one monitoring question, one defensible measure, one limitation and one next action relevant to their role. In the extended route, use the remaining ten minutes for paired

challenge and revision. Assess whether the measure answers the question and whether the limitation changes how the conclusion is phrased.

Completion standard: the participant can explain a sample, apply a coding rule, use a denominator correctly, separate an observation from an inference and identify a proportionate professional response. Do not assess success by agreement with the trainer’s political interpretation.

Training of trainers' guidance and assessment

Module-specific facilitation

Treat monitoring as a disciplined answer to a defined question. Do not begin with coding categories before participants agree on purpose, universe, sample and unit of analysis. Common mistakes include changing a sample without disclosure, confusing time allocation with tone, making causal claims from visibility data, and applying broadcast units to social-media research. Demonstrate one coding decision, let participants code independently, then compare and reconcile disagreement before analysing results.

Audience-specific application

Regulators need defensible evidence for supervision and remedy. EMBs need indicators relevant to voter information and institutional communication. Lawyers and policymakers need traceability from rule to indicator. Journalists benefit from understanding what monitoring can and cannot prove. Civil society and observers need feasible samples, quality control and cautious reporting. Use data and outputs appropriate to each role.

Assessment and evaluation

Use a short baseline task asking participants to formulate a monitoring question and choose a sample. Assess the sampling plan, coding reliability check, quantitative interpretation, qualitative finding and social-media narrative analysis. The final finding and recommendation provide the exit assessment.

Evidence of learning and trainer reflection

Participants meet the objective when they can define a workable sample, apply coding rules consistently, cross-tabulate relevant variables, distinguish airtime measurement from online narrative and behaviour analysis, and write a finding with limitations. Require one peer check of another group's evidence chain. Trainers should record categories that produced disagreement and whether retraining or codebook revision is needed.

Audience adaptation

Keep one method and vary the professional task

All audiences need the common evidence rules. Change the product they prepare and the questions they must defend rather than creating five separate lectures. In a mixed group, assign roles and ask each participant what the same evidence permits their institution to do.

Participant profile	Technique and expected product
Media regulators and supervisory authorities	A simulated monitoring-unit briefing: defend the sampling plan, challenge a disputed code and prepare an evidence request before considering action. Include institutional independence and a documented review process.
Election management bodies	A voter-information audit: identify gaps in accessible information and distinguish official communication from campaigning. Produce an internal action or referral note within the EMB's mandate.

Participant profile	Technique and expected product
Lawyers and judges	An evidence challenge: one side defends the dataset, another tests scope, reliability and the legal inference. Produce a reasoned assessment of what the evidence proves and what further inquiry is needed.
Policymakers	A policy clinic: identify whether the problem is a rule, implementation or inadequate evidence. Draft a targeted proposal with safeguards rather than introducing a blanket quota.
Journalists and media practitioners	A newsroom review: code their own fictional bulletin and online clips, verify a circulating narrative, explain editorial choices and design a practical quality check. Avoid converting legitimate criticism into a demand for positive coverage.
Civil society, NGOs and election observers	A monitoring and reporting workshop: publish a short finding with methodology, uncertainty and a feasible recommendation. Document narratives and behavioural indicators without prematurely labelling accounts as bots or trolls. Maintain a transparent correction procedure.

Adapting complexity

For newcomers, provide the codebook and a partly completed record. For experienced analysts, require independent coding, a missing-data assessment and a revised sampling strategy. A small operation should monitor fewer sources reliably rather than use a complicated design it cannot maintain.

For mixed audiences, use the same dataset throughout and give each group a different professional role. Bring them together for the reporting exercise so they can see where editorial responsibility, monitoring, investigation and adjudication diverge.

National adaptation

Replace fictional outlet names only if the exercise remains clearly identified as fictional. If using real local content, verify the source, context, translation and applicable standard, and keep participant material free of the intended conclusion. An Armenia-specific illustration may be added as a short local application without replacing the wider Council of Europe framework.

Follow-up task

Invite participants to use Sheet 7 to pilot five items after the training, compare codes with a colleague and revise one unclear rule. Ask them to retain a short explanation of the change. This is a learning exercise, not a claim that five items establish a campaign-wide pattern.

Sources and further reading

Standards and methodological references

[1] Council of Europe, Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)12 on electoral communication and media coverage of election campaigns, including its appendix. Use for the overall rights-based framework; check national implementation separately. Open source

[2] Council of Europe, Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)15 on measures concerning media coverage of election campaigns and Explanatory Memorandum. User-supplied file: REF COE-CM-

Rec(2007)15.pdf. Read with the 2022 recommendation, not as a complete account of online campaigning.

[3] OSCE/ODIHR, Handbook on Media Monitoring for Election Observation Missions, 2012. User-supplied file: ODIHR mm.pdf. Sections on the media analyst's role, media monitoring methodology and reporting. Open source

[4] OSCE/ODIHR, Guidelines for Observation of Election Campaigns on Social Networks, 2021. Sections on methodology, data collection, analysis and reporting, including the limitations of social-network data. Open source

[5] EODS III Media Analyst Training, 2021 and 2023: materials on the media analyst's role, the media environment, quantitative and qualitative monitoring, monitoring units, data management and statistics, reporting, recommendations, quizzes and exercises. These inform the training sequence and exercises; fictional data and tasks in this package are newly constructed.

[6] Rasťo Kužel and other named trainers in the supplied materials: Monitoring Methodology Ukraine final; MM as a complementary tool; Maastricht presentation; Media effects Ukraine; legal and media-environment exercises; and the Libya training agendas, presentations and reports, 2023–2024. Use as practical methodological background. Historical national rules, software references and numeric tone scales have not been carried over as current universal requirements.

[7] Council of Europe, Monitoring of media coverage of elections. Practical resource referenced in the supplied online-monitoring training. Open source

Recent election reports and locators

[8] OSCE/ODIHR, Georgia parliamentary elections, 26 October 2024, Final Report, 20 December 2024. Section XI, Media: printed page 23, footnote 104, and printed page 24, subsection C, Media Coverage of the Campaign. The PDF page count includes the cover. Open source

[9] OSCE/ODIHR, Serbia local elections, 2 June 2024, Final Report. Section VIII, Election Campaign, printed page 16, online campaign discussion; monitoring period 1 May–2 June. Open source

[10] OSCE/ODIHR, Bosnia and Herzegovina local elections, 6 October 2024, Final Report. Section VIII, Election Campaign, printed pages 15–16, online campaign discussion. Open source

Trainer source check

Before substituting a recent case, read the original report section and its methodological footnotes. Preserve qualifications, distinguish monitoring findings from allegations and decisions, and verify any legal rule against the applicable text. Do not combine percentages from different reports as though their samples and definitions were identical.

The accompanying participant document contains only scenarios, tasks, data and questions. The worked calculations and suggested interpretations remain in this trainer guidance.

Module 4: Assessing media coverage and identifying imbalances

Training material to be shared with participants

CONTENTS

SHEET 1 DESIGN A MONITORING SAMPLE 21

SHEET 2 CODE THE COVERAGE 22

SHEET 3 READ THE FIGURES 24

SHEET 4-A AUDIT SOCIAL-MEDIA DATA 25

SHEET 4-B ANALYSE NARRATIVES AND BEHAVIOUR 26

SHEET 5 WRITE A DEFENSIBLE FINDING 27

SHEET 6 COMPARE RECENT ELECTIONS 27

SHEET 7 REUSABLE MONITORING RECORD 28

Work with your group to collect, interpret and communicate evidence about election coverage. Explain your decisions and record uncertainty. The aim is a defensible assessment, not agreement with a preferred political conclusion.

Sheets 1–5 use fictional scenarios and invented training data. They are not findings about any actual outlet, political actor or election. Sheet 6 contains short, attributed summaries of recent observation reports. Sheet 7 is a blank record for practice.

Your trainer will select activities and time limits. You may write in this workbook or use a separate sheet. A calculator is sufficient; no specialist software or online account is required. Suggested answers and debriefs are held separately by the trainer.

Sheet 1 Design a monitoring sample

GROUP TASK Sampling plan | SESSION TIME 15, 20 or 25 minutes including discussion

Scenario

A parliamentary election is approaching. Your team can capture and analyse up to 24 hours of broadcast output over 12 selected days and monitor six public online accounts. There is no reliable new audience survey. You have two coders and one part-time supervisor, with competence in the majority language and one minority language. The team must also reserve time for checking and reporting.

The task is to assess whether voters receive diverse and useful campaign information. Your brief covers influential national communication but also asks you to consider local and minority-language audiences. You cannot monitor every source.

Available source	Relevant features
Public TV	Nationwide evening news, 30 minutes daily; debates separately; website and public video account.
Commercial TV One	Widely watched according to older research; 30-minute evening news; different ownership from TV Two.
Commercial TV Two	National distribution; 30-minute evening news; prominent political interviews and short online clips.
Regional TV	30-minute evening news serving a competitive region; no reliable audience estimate.
Local minority-language radio	Daily 30-minute news; serves listeners with limited connectivity.
Independent news website	Substantial election reporting; public social account; no audited reach figure.
Contestant accounts	Three principal parties and several smaller contestants post on public social services.
Institutional accounts	The government and EMB publish announcements and voter information.

Task

Prepare a short sampling plan. Specify the question, sources, dates or selection rule, time slots, formats, online account categories, units and missing-data procedure. Use seconds for broadcast and consider centimetres squared for print or words, pixels or screen area for a fixed archived webpage. Explain how it fits the budget and what additional staff time is needed beyond recording.

1. Which sources will you include, and why? Which important communication will remain outside the sample?

2. How will you avoid choosing online accounts merely because they are easy to find or have the most followers?

3. How will you handle a major incident on an unmonitored account without silently changing the sample?

4. What claim will your sample support, and what claim will it not support?

5. How will you prioritise frontrunners while documenting smaller or emerging contestants and explaining sparse coverage of underdogs?

6. Does the period meet the practical two-week minimum for describing campaign tendencies? If not, how must the finding be narrowed?

Group record

Our monitoring question:

.....

Our selection and main limitation:

.....

Sheet 2 Code the coverage

INDIVIDUAL AND PAIRED TASK Coding comparison | SESSION TIME 20, 25 or 35 minutes

Rules for this exercise

Record actor, role, total attributed duration, direct and indirect coverage, and tone. Direct coverage is the actor's own recorded voice; indirect coverage concerns the actor without their direct speech. Direct plus indirect equals total attributed time. Split official activity and explicit campaigning into separate segments.

Assess tone through two factors: content—what is said—and context—how it is presented through images, sound, captions, editing or other cues. If the factors differ, determine the tone according to the prevailing factor and record the basis. If neither prevails, flag the item for review rather than silently calling it neutral. News is not expected to be neutral, and a negative tone code does not itself mean unfair journalism. The object assessed is the media outlet's treatment, not whether the political actor deserves criticism.

Fictional transcript items

Item 1 — 30 seconds. A newsreader spends 20 seconds stating that the health minister opened a clinic and explaining its opening hours. The minister then speaks for 10 seconds: "The clinic opens on Monday and offers appointments from eight until six." The item shows a ribbon-cutting, smiling officials and applause. No party or election is mentioned.

Item 2 — 20 seconds. A presenter spends 10 seconds describing Candidate A as "an exceptionally capable leader with an impressive record", accompanied by a flattering campaign montage. A then speaks for 10 seconds: "Our campaign meeting takes place on Saturday at the town hall."

Item 3 — 20 seconds. A newsreader reports that an independent audit found Candidate B had failed to disclose required expenditure. B is the subject throughout and a red “FAILURE TO DISCLOSE” graphic remains on screen. No statement from B appears in this extract. No additional information about the rest of the programme is supplied.

Item 4 — 20 seconds. The health minister speaks for 10 seconds about the date and services of a clinic opening. The minister then says for 10 seconds: “I am standing for Party A. Vote for Party A on Sunday.” The wording contains no additional evaluative claim.

Your task

Code independently, then compare with a partner before changing any answer. Use separate rows for segments if necessary. Preserve your original decision and explain any revision.

Quantitative record

Item	Actor and role	Total seconds	Direct seconds	Indirect seconds
1				
2				
3				
4				

Tone record

Item or segment	Content tone	Context tone	Final tone and prevailing-factor basis
1			
2			
3			
4			

Questions

1. Where did your codes differ, and which rule would resolve the disagreement?

2. What further information is needed before describing an item as unfair?

3. How would you test a revised codebook on new material?

4. Where did content and context reinforce each other, and where did they differ? Which factor prevailed and why?

Our agreed rule clarification:

.....

Sheet 3 Read the figures

GROUP TASK Calculation and interpretation | SESSION TIME 15, 20 or 30 minutes

Fictional dataset

Public TV was scheduled for monitoring across 14 daily evening bulletins. Twelve 30-minute bulletins were recorded; two recordings are missing. The table contains all coverage attributed to the four listed actor categories in those 12 recordings. Other news is outside this actor table. There are no overlapping actor intervals or unresolved tone codes in this dataset. All values below are seconds.

Party A is the governing party. Official government coverage is kept separate from its campaign coverage. Direct speech is included in total actor coverage. The three tone columns also sum to that total; neither is additional airtime.

Actor	Total	Direct	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Government official role	180	120	0	180	0
Party A	120	60	30	90	0
Party B	180	30	0	60	120
Party C	120	60	0	120	0

Calculations

1. Calculate each actor's share of all listed actor coverage. State the denominator.

2. Calculate each party's share when official government coverage is excluded. State the new denominator and your rounding rule.

3. Calculate direct speech as a proportion of each actor's own coverage.

4. Calculate indirect coverage for each actor and confirm that direct plus indirect equals total coverage.

5. Calculate B's negative coverage as a proportion of B's total coverage.

6. What does combining official government coverage and Party A show? What does it risk obscuring?

Interpretation

Cross-tabulate or read together total time, direct and indirect coverage, tone and actor role. Does the party with the most coverage necessarily receive the most favourable treatment? Identify two possible explanations that require checking before you conclude that an imbalance is unfair.

What can you say about the two missing bulletins? What additional content or records would help assess the pattern? Distinguish a share of actor coverage from a share of total programme time.

Group conclusion

One finding supported by the table:

.....

One conclusion that would go beyond the evidence:

.....

One necessary follow-up check:

.....

Sheet 4-A Audit social-media data

GROUP TASK Check the data before comparing | SESSION TIME 15, 20 or 25 minutes

Fictional dataset

An analyst exports the following rows from a small sample of public accounts on one fictional service. “Interactions” means the recorded sum of reactions, comments and shares. The source provides no information about unique users, paid promotion or audience characteristics. The table contains repeated captures as well as different posts.

Post ID	Account	Age at capture	Interactions	Collection note
A1	Party A	72 hours	1,200	Content captured
A2	Party A	24 hours	400	Content captured
A1	Party A	72 hours	1,200	Same export row repeated
B1	Party B	72 hours	800	Content captured
B2	Party B	Unknown	Missing	Post no longer available at collection
I1	Government institution	72 hours	900	Content not yet reviewed

Task

Prepare a data-quality note before anyone publishes a party comparison. Identify the number of rows, unique posts and unique contestant posts with an observed interaction count. Explain which comparisons are defensible and which need better data.

1. How should repeated rows be handled without losing meaningful repeated measurements?

2. Can a missing interaction value be treated as zero? What should be recorded about the unavailable post?

3. Are the collection ages comparable? What rule would you use for the next collection round?

4. Should I1 be added to Party A’s campaign total? What must be checked first?

5. What would be wrong with describing the counts as “supporters reached” or evidence that the platform favours one party?

6. What additional fields would help distinguish organic content from advertising or other paid promotion?

Group record

Data issues to correct or disclose:

.....

A safe statement about what was observed:

.....

One claim the data cannot establish:

.....

Sheet 4-B Analyse narratives and behaviour

GROUP TASK Separate observations, hypotheses and conclusions | SESSION TIME 8, 10 or 15 minutes

Fictional observations

During one evening, 12 public accounts post the claim “Ballot scanners discard every third opposition vote” and link to the same anonymous page. The posts appear between 20:00 and 20:08 and use identical wording. Eight accounts were created during the previous seven days and use generic profile images.

Within the next 20 minutes, short bursts of comments repeat two identical slogans under three news articles about election technology. Four long-established activist accounts share the claim later that evening, adding their own comments and different images.

The monitoring team has the public posts, account creation dates and collection timestamps. It has no internal platform data about account control, devices, location, automation, payment or recommendation systems. It has not yet verified the claim about the scanners.

Task

Prepare a preliminary analytical note. Separate the narrative from the behaviour used to distribute it. State what the observations support, what remains a hypothesis and which evidence would be required for a stronger conclusion.

1. What is the recurring narrative? Which source, target, format and time fields should be coded?

2. Which facts may indicate coordination or artificial amplification? What genuine behaviour could produce a similar pattern?

3. Can the team call the claim “disinformation” before checking whether it is false and whether someone spread it deliberately to deceive?

4. Can the eight recent accounts be described as bots or trolls? What technical, platform or investigative evidence would be needed?

5. Should the four established activists automatically be grouped with the 12 early accounts? Explain your decision.

6. What public evidence should be preserved, and what personal data should not be published?

Preliminary note

Observed pattern:

.....

Analytical hypothesis:

.....

Unsupported conclusion to avoid:

.....

Verification and referral step:

.....

Sheet 5 Write a defensible finding

GROUP TASK Rewrite and professional response | SESSION TIME 10, 15 or 20 minutes

Fictional draft statement

"Public TV was fair because Party B received the most coverage. The government and Party A took half of all news time, proving an illegal advantage. Online figures show that Party A had more supporters and that the platform favoured it. The regulator should immediately order equal positive coverage for every party."

Task

Using Sheets 3, 4A and 4B, replace this statement with a short, publishable finding of no more than 100 words. Include the source, scope, relevant figures and limitations. Do not turn a concern into a proven violation, or behavioural indicators into proven bots or trolls, without the necessary evidence.

Then propose one next action for the professional role assigned to your group: regulator, EMB, lawyer or judge, policymaker, journalist, or civil society observer. Identify who should act and what evidence they need.

Questions for peer review

1. Are units and denominators explicit and correct?
2. Are direct observation, interpretation and recommendation distinguishable?
3. Does the statement disclose missing material and avoid generalising to the whole election?
4. Does it confuse tone with bias, interactions with people, or visibility with influence?
5. Is the proposed action within the recipient's responsibility and proportionate to what is known?

Your finding

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Your next action and responsible actor

.....

.....

One change after peer review

.....

Sheet 6 Compare recent elections

OPTIONAL GROUP TASK Evidence and limits | SESSION TIME 5 or 20 minutes

Case A Georgia parliamentary elections 2024

In its 18 September–25 October monitoring, ODIHR found that Formula devoted 56 per cent of campaign news coverage to Georgian Dream; 89 per cent of that party's coverage was negative. The report also noted that the regulator published no monitoring conclusions before election day.

Source: ODIHR Final Report, 20 December 2024, Section XI, printed pages 23–24, including footnote 104. Open source

Question: What would be lost if a report showed only the share of coverage? What further evidence would you seek, and when should useful monitoring findings be available?

Case B Serbia local elections 2024

ODIHR reported approximately one million interactions with the Facebook and X accounts of eight actors from the ruling SNS, compared with 228,000 for the accounts of the 12 most prominent opposition actors, during 1 May–2 June.

Source: ODIHR Final Report on the 2 June 2024 local elections, Section VIII, printed page 16. Open source

Question: What methodological information would you request before interpreting this contrast? Which claims about voters or platform behaviour would require different evidence?

Case C Bosnia and Herzegovina local elections 2024

ODIHR examined 63 political actors, of whom 46 were active on the monitored services. It reported no systematic dissemination of hate speech or disinformation in the sample, while noting some inflammatory rhetoric.

Source: ODIHR Final Report on the 6 October 2024 local elections, Section VIII, printed pages 15–16. Open source

Question: How should a report describe the absence of a pattern in a sample? What would you need before making a wider claim about the online campaign?

Group task

Select one case and identify: the observation; the scope of evidence; a tempting but unsupported inference; and one useful follow-up question. Use the original report section for fuller context. These summaries are not equivalent national indicators and should not be used to rank the three elections.

Our follow-up question:

.....

Sheet 7 Reusable monitoring record

PRACTICE FORM Use one record per item and additional rows for actor segments

Date and coder: .....

Monitoring question and codebook version: .....

Outlet or account and account role: .....

Programme or format and item ID: .....

Publication date and time: .....

Capture date and time with time zone: .....

Timecode or source URL: .....

Evidence file location or reference: .....

Actor coding

Actor and role	Segment or reference	Total and unit	Direct and indirect	Content tone, context tone and final basis

Qualitative record

Relevant wording, presentation or source context:

.....

.....

Response opportunity or other context requiring verification:

.....

Additional online fields where relevant

Post or ad ID and known sponsor: .....

Observed metric, definition and value: .....

Age at capture and known promotion status: .....

Quality check

Missing information or coding uncertainty: .....

Reviewer and resolution, retaining the original decision: .....

.....

Store evidence securely. Avoid unnecessary personal data and do not reproduce harmful content in a public report merely to demonstrate that it was observed.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

HUMAN RIGHTS, DEMOCRACY AND THE RULE OF LAW

DROITS DE L'HOMME, DÉMOCRATIE ET ÉTAT DE DROIT

CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

MODULE 4
ASSESSING MEDIA COVERAGE AND IDENTIFYING IMBALANCES

Purpose and learning outcomes

- Define a monitoring question, population, sample, period and unit
- Combine quantitative measurement with qualitative assessment
- Apply coding rules and document reliability checks
- Interpret results using explicit denominators and limitations
- Assess online narratives and behaviour without overclaiming
- Write an evidence based finding and feasible recommendation

90, 120 AND 180 MINUTE ROUTES

Monitoring as an evidence process

QUESTION

What do we need to know?

SAMPLE

Which content can answer it?

CODE

How will we record it?

CHECK

Are records complete and consistent?

INTERPRET

What does the pattern support?

REPORT

What action follows?

The opening questions

VISIBILITY — How much coverage did each contestant receive?

TREATMENT — Did an outlet treat comparable contestants fairly?

IMPACT — Did online campaigning change the result?

Each question needs different evidence.

QUESTION SORTING | 10 MINUTES

What monitoring can and cannot establish

CAN ESTABLISH	CANNOT ESTABLISH ALONE
Observed visibility and treatment	How many voters saw the content
Patterns within the defined sample	Whether voters believed it
Differences requiring explanation	How communication changed votes

Different media, different measures

BROADCAST

Time, direct speech, tone, programme and prominence

PRINT

Space, placement, headline treatment and sources

FIXED WEB PAGE

Archived words, screen area, placement and capture time

SOCIAL MEDIA

Narratives, account behaviour, amplification and public metrics

A transparent sampling plan

QUESTION	A narrow claim the sample can answer	**SOURCES**	Outlets, accounts, languages and regions
PERIOD	Dates, time slots and campaign phases	**UNIT**	Item, segment, post, ad or page capture
LIMITS	What remains outside the sample	**CAPACITY**	Collection, coding, review and reporting time

SAMPLING WORKSHOP | SHEET 1 | 15–25 MINUTES

The fictional sampling budget

BROADCAST CEILING

24 recorded hours

ONLINE CEILING

6 public accounts

Four 30 minute bulletins over 12 days use the full broadcast ceiling. What diversity is lost?

Sampling choices that need explanation

- Influence and diversity criteria for outlets and accounts
- Language, region and accessibility coverage
- Treatment of smaller and emerging contestants
- A fixed procedure for unexpected incidents
- Missing days, recordings and unavailable posts
- Changes to the design and their effect on comparability

Minimum coding rules

ACTOR	Who receives the coverage?	**ROLE**	Official, campaign or other capacity
TOTAL	All attributed time or space	**DIRECT**	The actor's own recorded voice
INDIRECT	Coverage without the actor's direct speech	**TONE**	Content, context and prevailing basis

Tone considers content and context

CONTENT

What the words say

CONTEXT

Images, sound, captions, editing and other cues

If they differ, apply the declared prevailing factor rule and record the basis.

Coding exercise

- Item 1: official clinic opening with celebratory visuals
- Item 2: flattering introduction followed by Candidate A
- Item 3: an audit finding about Candidate B with no reply in the extract
- Item 4: official information followed by an explicit appeal to vote

INDIVIDUAL THEN PAIRED | SHEET 2 | 20–35 MINUTES

The coding traps

TARGET	Assigning criticism to the wrong actor
DOUBLE COUNT	Adding direct speech to total coverage twice
ROLE	Treating every official appearance as campaigning
TONE	Using negative tone as a synonym for unfairness
EVIDENCE	Inferring visual framing from a transcript

Reliability before full collection

COMPARE	Record agreement before discussion
DIAGNOSE	Identify the field and rule behind disagreement
REVISE	Clarify the codebook using difficult examples
RETEST	Use fresh material and independent coding
RETAIN	Keep original and adjudicated records

Agreement can coexist with a shared misunderstanding.

Data quality during collection

- Permitted values and missing identifiers
- Duplicate records and impossible durations
- Direct time exceeding total time
- Unexpected changes by coder or day
- Codebook revisions and their effect on earlier records
- Secure evidence storage and limited personal data

Begin interpretation with the denominator

ALL LISTED ACTORS

600 actor seconds

CONTESTANTS ONLY

420 actor seconds

These are not shares of 360 minutes of recorded news.

Visibility and treatment in the same table

GOVERNMENT	180 total, 120 direct, all neutral
PARTY A	120 total, 60 direct, 30 positive
PARTY B	180 total, 30 direct, 120 negative
PARTY C	120 total, 60 direct, all neutral

The contestant with most coverage does not necessarily receive the most favourable treatment.

Aggregation can conceal imbalance

OUTLET 1	OUTLET 2
Strongly favours Party A	**Strongly favours Party B**

A combined total may look balanced while each audience receives one-sided coverage.

Quantitative and qualitative evidence

QUANTITATIVE	QUALITATIVE
Time or space	Framing and editing
Direct speech	Prominence and sources
Tone counts	Opportunity to respond
Frequency	Relevant omissions

Online monitoring asks different questions

CONTENT	BEHAVIOUR	DISTRIBUTION
Narratives, targets, formats and claims	**Timing, repetition, account history and coordination indicators**	**Organic, paid, recommended or otherwise amplified**

Public signals justify questions. They do not prove intent, automation or platform favouritism.

Public metrics require a data audit

- Count rows, unique posts and valid observations separately
- Preserve repeated captures without double counting posts
- Treat missing values as missing, not zero
- Compare metrics at similar ages after publication
- Check account role before combining totals
- Record whether paid promotion is known or unknown

Narratives and behaviour

Twelve public accounts repeat the same ballot scanner claim within eight minutes.

OBSERVATION	Identical wording, tight timing, shared link and recent accounts
HYPOTHESIS	Possible coordination or artificial amplification
NOT YET PROVEN	Falsity, deceptive intent, bots, trolls or common control
NEXT STEP	Verify the claim, preserve evidence and seek platform or technical data

ANALYTICAL NOTE | SHEET 4B | 8–15 MINUTES

Evidence ladder for online claims

OBSERVED	A public post or metric captured at a stated time
INDICATOR	A pattern that justifies further inquiry
COORDINATION	Evidence connects accounts or actions
INAUTHENTIC OR AUTOMATED	Technical or platform evidence supports the label
ATTRIBUTION	Reliable evidence identifies the responsible actor
IMPACT	Exposure and causal evidence support an electoral effect claim

A defensible finding

SOURCE AND SCOPE	Outlet or account, period, format and sample
OBSERVATION	Figures, qualitative evidence and denominator
INTERPRETATION	Why the pattern matters under the stated standard
LIMITS	Missing material and alternative explanations
NEXT ACTION	A feasible step for the responsible actor

REWRITE TASK | SHEET 5 | 10–20 MINUTES

Overclaiming to remove

"Party B received most coverage, so Public TV was fair."	Visibility alone does not settle treatment.
"Half of all news time went to the government and Party A."	The table measures actor coverage, not total news.
"Interactions show that Party A had more supporters."	Interactions are neither unique people nor political support.
"The regulator must order equal positive coverage."	The evidence does not establish that remedy or mandate.

Recent election evidence

OPTIONAL OR EXTENDED

GEORGIA 2024

Coverage share and strongly negative tone require joint interpretation

SERBIA 2024

Interaction totals require scope, metric and exposure cautions

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA 2024

An absent pattern in a sample supports only a scoped conclusion

Georgia 2024

SHARE OF COVERAGE

56% devoted to Georgian Dream

TONE WITHIN THAT SHARE

89% of that coverage was negative

A coverage share without tone would conceal the character of the reporting.

One dataset, different professional tasks

REGULATORS	Assess compliance and select a proportionate next step
EMBs	**OPTIONAL OR EXTENDED** Improve voter information and refer matters outside the mandate
LAWYERS / JUDGES	Test evidence, procedure and legal characterisation
POLICYMAKERS	Identify a rule, mandate or data access gap
JOURNALISTS	Audit editorial practice and correct verified errors
CIVIL SOCIETY / OBSERVERS	Publish a transparent finding with clear limits

Learning check

- State the monitoring question and denominator
- Name one sampling limitation that changes the conclusion
- Explain why visibility and tone must be read together
- Separate an online observation from a hypothesis
- Identify the responsible actor and a feasible next step

ASSESSMENT | 5–10 MINUTES

Key messages

- Collect evidence that answers a stated question
- Quantity and quality require joint interpretation
- Outlet and format results should remain visible
- Broadcast and social media monitoring answer different questions
- Public metrics are useful but incomplete
- Findings should be reproducible, timely and proportionate to the evidence

END OF MODULE 4