

SERVICES TO THE MEDIA

The media are a primary source of information to the community during an election. In preparation for the 2007 State election the NSWEC sought to actively engage the media to improve elector awareness and understanding of the electoral process.

The NSWEC established a small team to answer media enquiries and assist the media by providing press releases on key election processes. It provided 16 media releases during the course of the election on topics ranging from enrolment, nominations, how to vote, recruitment of election officials and the counting of the votes. The media releases were distributed to over 360 media outlets throughout New South Wales through the Australian Associated Press MediaNet service. See Appendix 10 for a list of media releases issued.

Information provided to the media

During the course of the election the Electoral Commissioner was interviewed on 94 occasions by 43 radio stations (including 18 regional stations), 2 television stations and 2 newspapers.

Interview topics included:

- enrolment;
- elector information campaign;
- voting (pre-poll, postal and election day);
- electoral district boundaries;
- issue of the Writs;
- nominations;
- preferences;
- how to vote correctly; and
- vote counting processes.

The NSWEC provided further news information to media outlets including:

Television: ABN 2, ATN 7, TCN 9, Network 10, SBS TV, Sky TV and WIN TV.

Radio: Sydney metropolitan and state-wide regional, ABC, SBS, Koori Radio and community language radio.

Newspapers: *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Daily Telegraph*, *The Australian Financial Review*, *The Australian*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Sun-Herald* and a number of regional and suburban newspapers.

Independent research commissioned by the NSWEC found that the Electoral Commissioner was regarded very favourably by the media as an informative communicator. It was difficult, however, to accommodate all requests.

Information kit

The NSWEC produced an information kit as a resource for the media and professional election analysts. The kit contained clear and accurate information about the electoral process.

It contained:

- information on the composition of the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council;
- background to the redistribution of the electoral district boundaries; and
- comprehensive profiles of each New South Wales electoral district, including the swing needed for the seat to change hands, an historical profile of the district's Members of Parliament and a statistical profile based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001 Census data.

The kit was distributed to a number of media outlets, registered political parties, interstate Electoral Commissions, certain libraries and election officials. An extract from the kit is attached at Appendix 11.

The tally room

The tally room, located at Acer Arena, Sydney Olympic Park, Homebush Bay, provided a central point for the display of election results on election night.

Transforming this venue into the central results point on election night was a resource intensive activity, which included installing and testing the electronic tally board, computer equipment and telecommunication lines. Space was allocated for media organisations and registered political parties.

Four large screens were placed across the floor at the end of the main arena behind the TV broadcast positions. These displayed the progressive first preference figures for each electoral district. Major television networks presented their election coverage from temporary sets constructed on the arena floor with the tally room electronic screens used as their backdrop.

The tally room cost \$391,235 to establish and operate including venue hire, security, communication and technical expenses. Television and radio networks met the cost of constructing their own sets on the tally room floor.

On election night the tally room was attended by major media organisations including:

- ABC, ATN 7, TCN 9, Network 10, SBS TV and Sky TV;
- 2GB, 2UE, SBS radio; and
- New South Wales and national print media organisations.

The ABC was the only television station to do a full broadcast from the tally room on election night. For the first time TCN 9 did not do a full broadcast.

Registered political parties, politicians and interstate election officials were invited to attend the tally room but for security and budgetary considerations the general public were not. The main political leaders were not present at the tally room.

Electronic transmission of election results

After the close of voting on election night, each polling place manager phoned their electoral district returning officer to advise the first preference count figures for candidates contesting the Legislative Assembly and the first preferences for groups contesting the Legislative Council.

Those figures were entered by each returning officer into EMA and the results were transmitted to the tally room. The progressive first preference figures for each electoral district were displayed on the electronic screens at the tally room.

The results were fed to the major television networks and they were simultaneously displayed on the NSWEC virtual tally room. Media attending the tally room had a WIFI capability available for computer connection to the NSWEC results website.

Voting figures started to come through from smaller polling places just after 6pm with 270 polling places returning results between 6pm and 7pm. Over 70% of polling places (1863) returned results between 7pm and 9pm while 32 polling places provided results after 11pm.

The future of the tally room

The tally room was not well attended by registered political parties, political leaders or the media on election night, and the increasing use of the internet as the primary source of election results calls into question the need for an expensive central results location. Consequently the NSWEC proposes not having a tally room at the next State election in 2011.



Review of performance

Debrief

Following the election a media audit was conducted by the contracted media consultants, who interviewed selected journalists from television, radio and the print media, to evaluate the information services provided by the NSWEC.

Overall the journalists interviewed recognised an improved commitment to open communication by the NSWEC as evidenced by the provision of the information kit, media releases and up to date information on the website. Journalists also commented positively on the preparedness of the Electoral Commissioner to be interviewed on all aspects of the electoral process.

The journalists interviewed commented on the usefulness of the information kit, with regional journalists in particular saying the background information for each electoral district was beneficial.

The NSWEC website was an important source of information and was frequently accessed by journalists during the election period. Some journalists' comments suggest that the useability of the website could be improved to provide easier access to information, results being updated more frequently and a greater focus on results in marginal electoral districts.

The political neutrality of the NSWEC was noted.

Complaints about the media

During the course of the election the NSWEC received only one complaint about the media. The NSWEC has no jurisdiction over the media, and this complainant was referred to the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal.