Module 3: Interview with Ludo Bok

[00:00:10] **Maryn McKenna** Hello, and welcome back to the video segments of our MOOC, Covering the COVID-19 Vaccines: What Journalists Need to Know.

[00:00:19] **Maryn McKenna** I'm Maryn McKenna, I'm your chief instructor and I'm here today with Ludo Bok with the HIV Health and Development Group for the United Nations Development Program. Thank you so much for joining our course.

[00:00:33] **Ludo Bok** Thank you so much for having me.

[00:00:35] **Maryn McKenna** So at this point in this book, we're exploring the challenge of Mis- and disinformation. How is UNDP involved in this effort?

[00:00:46] **Ludo Bok** Well, UNDP has been dealing with the challenge of disinformation across many of our thematic areas for a number of years now, looking at elections, climate change, prevention of violent extremism, etc..

[00:01:01] **Ludo Bok** So last year, when the whole COVID-19 disinformation wave started, we really began to explore the issue of information pollution. We hate to call it fake news, I like to refer to it as information pollution. More strategically, I really wanted to understand, like, how is this impacting public health efforts as well as looking at the long term implications for democracy, social cohesion and human rights.

[00:01:31] **Ludo Bok** So we now have a dedicated team at Oslo Governance Center, which is really focusing on research, building internal knowledge as well as capacity and mobilizing strategic partnership. So last year in October, we organized a global online consultation with UNESCO to really explore the impacts, the drivers and responses to disinformation in different contexts. And that's feeding into our overall work.

[00:02:03] **Ludo Bok** So, we work at four different areas at country level. One is looking at building public trusts and ensuring access to reliable and accurate official information sources. So, for instance, in Uruguay, we've been partnering with the National Resource Fund and we created an online platform providing real time answers to COVID-related questions.

[00:02:32] **Ludo Bok** Our second area is working with journalists and sort of building that capacity and effectively managing information pollution. So like in Sierra Leone, we provide a training on how to deal with this information in the newsroom, how to avoid amplification of disinformation and how to effectively debunk it.

[00:02:58] **Ludo Bok** Then, the third area that we work in is building public resilience to information pollution. Like, for instance, working with religious leaders in Somalia to promote accurate information about COVID-19 and to warn about the dangers of spreading disinformation.

[00:03:18] **Ludo Bok** In Lebanon, we launched the Count to Ten campaign, which basically is trying to promote critical thinking and public awareness of the risks of this disinformation.

[00:03:30] **Ludo Bok** And finally, we're working with countries and developing evidence and rights-based information pollution policies. Like, in Bangladesh, we're supporting the

monitoring of online and offline extremism and hate speech and disinformation, and then making that data available to government institutions and other partners to really inform the development of different policies to counter this.

[00:04:02] **Ludo Bok** And then, we've just launched the Vaccine Acceptance Monitor in Uruguay, together with media measurements and disability tracks and quantifies general acceptance of vaccines in Uruguay. And we're sharing this data with government, with media and the public to really try to enhance communication strategies, aiming to tackle the infofdemic.

[00:04:31] **Maryn McKenna** That's a lot of efforts.

[00:04:33] **Ludo Bok** That's a lot of efforts, it is just a few highlights.

[00:04:38] **Maryn McKenna** So as you've gotten these efforts started, are you finding that there were particular types or maybe particular categories of misinformation or disinformation with regard to COVID and the vaccines? Could you break those down for us?

[00:04:55] **Ludo Bok** Well, WHO likes to call it an infodemic, which basically, as we all know, we are bombarded with messages by the media, social media, and basically we have this overabundance of information, some is accurate, some is not.

[00:05:17] **Ludo Bok** Then looking at it, we're basically dealing with two types of information.

[00:05:24] **Ludo Bok** One is misinformation, which is false information that's shared unintentionally. People don't necessarily mean harm, but they just don't have the right information. For instance, a lack of reliable data on COVID-19 vaccines, for instance, could cause well-meaning individuals to share false or misleading information, especially since it is rapidly evolving.

[00:05:52] **Ludo Bok** Then the other type of information is disinformation. This is deliberately engineered false information with a malicious intent or to serve a personal or political or economic agenda.

[00:06:06] **Ludo Bok** Like, what we see now is the anti-vaccine movement is actively trying to spread false information. And another example, is friends of the state could purposefully spread anti-vaccine messages to sow social discord/polarization in a different country.

[00:06:26] **Maryn McKenna** I think I--

[00:06:27] **Ludo Bok** But ultimately, both are harmful to the COVID-19 response efforts and can create confusion and erode trust.

[00:06:38] **Maryn McKenna** So I think I've read recently that there has been a perception that some part, some disinformation campaigns have been launched effectively as tools of nationalism, that if one country wants its vaccines to do well in the global marketplace, they might launch a disinformation campaign against another country's vaccine to make it look not so good.

[00:07:01] **Ludo Bok** Which is why I was using the example, yes.

[00:07:07] **Maryn McKenna** So how is it that, how does misinformation and disinformation, how do they harm the COVID vaccination effort? What kind of havoc are they actually going to cause?

[00:07:19] **Ludo Bok** Well, we know that and we've seen like, we need new innovations, we need new diagnostics, therapeutics, vaccines, and they're all critical in the fight against COVID-19. But, to end the pandemic, these tools need to be equitably accessible to all.

[00:07:40] **Ludo Bok** So what we've seen in our work at UNDP is how misinformation and disinformation around COVID has increased stigma, discrimination and human rights violations against vulnerable populations, putting them at even greater risk and prolonging the pandemic.

[00:08:01] **Ludo Bok** For example, in the beginning of the pandemic, we saw a lot of stigma against people who had contracted COVID, even against health care workers.

[00:08:11] **Ludo Bok** Similarly, mis- and disinformation is sometimes spread by governments and religious leaders, which has resulted in LGBTQ+ people being singled out, blamed, incarcerated and stigmatized during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[00:08:29] **Ludo Bok** So, if there is a continuation of mis- and disinformation being spread, there's a really real risk that vulnerable communities will be left behind in the vaccination efforts and that the virus will continue to thrive. And, it not only impacts these vulnerable populations, but cripples the entire COVID-19 response.

[00:08:54] **Ludo Bok** To put it simply, unless everyone has access to the tools and vaccines needed to end the pandemic, it will persist. Or, as Dr. Tedros from the World Health Organization likes to say, no one is safe until everyone is safe.

[00:09:11] **Ludo Bok** You mentioned when we started talking that UNDP has been doing a number of trainings for journalists around mis- and disinformation. So, what is it that you want journalists to do, are there best practices that you can share about resisting these influences?

[00:09:27] **Ludo Bok** Um, well, I think, first of all, rely on the experts. It's important to elevate the voices of experts in your writing or in your shows. Include scientists, health care professionals to provide accurate, trustworthy information to help people make decisions about their health.

[00:09:53] **Ludo Bok** In some cases, the most trusted voices might be other respected members of your community, like, the example I used with religious leaders in Somalia or [INAUDIBLE]. Of course, then, it's important that these individuals are equipped with the right language and techniques to communicate about the importance of vaccines and their proven safety.

[00:10:18] **Ludo Bok** Second, keep it simple. I think that's one lesson that every journalist knows, but make your writing about COVID as straightforward and free of jargon as possible. Present accurate information in a way that's easy to understand and easy to remember.

[00:10:37] **Ludo Bok** And then third, make sure it's a good narrative, like ultimately storytelling about COVID vaccines must be accurate, but also relatable and engaging to help everyone understand why vaccines are safe, effective and important. And then within that, if you are writing about vulnerable populations most at risk from mis- and disinformation, it's important that they form a key part of that narrative that you really work with.

[00:11:14] **Maryn McKenna** So, let me ask you a final question, as I shared with you when we started taping. Participants in these courses come from all over the world and many of them, though they have been made COVID reporters over the past year, do not themselves have training in science or public health.

[00:11:32] **Maryn McKenna** They're coming to this with a great deal of enthusiasm and a great deal of bravery, but still kind of new to the topic. And I found that our participants often feel kind of daunted, particularly in the necessary task of countering mis- and disinformation, because they feel as though there's an entire industry arrayed against them, meant to to push bad information out to the public.

[00:11:59] **Maryn McKenna** Do you have any words of advice or encouragement for them as they forge ahead in fighting back against misinformation and disinformation?

[00:12:09] **Ludo Bok** I'd say if you're reporting on misinformation, lead with the truth and state facts clearly and try to avoid putting this info in headlines like questions as tempting as that might be to sort of get attention.

[00:12:28] **Ludo Bok** Then if you're reporting on missing information, clearly explain why the misinformation is incorrect or misleading and highlight if there are any hidden motives of disinformation, what what these are. And then, keep repeating the truth, cite trusted resources so that when people want to follow up on your articles or news item that they get the right information from trusted resources.

[00:13:02] **Ludo Bok** And finally, as a journalist, you play a significant role in shaping the narrative around COVID and COVID vaccine safety. So what I want to end with is like, yeah, you're right, it could save lives. So, wishing you all the best.

[00:13:24] **Maryn McKenna** That's such great advice. Thank you so much. Thanks for sharing this with our participants in our course. This was was Maryn speaking to Ludo Bok of the United Nations Development Program. Thank you all for watching this segment. We'll see you on line.