

Module 3: The impact of online harmful practices on the electoral cycle and tools to tackle them

[00:00:18] **Speaker 1** Welcome to module three of the massive open online course on "Information and Elections in The Digital Era." This course is organized by the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas with the support of UNESCO and UNDP. I'm very happy that you're here today. My name is Albertina Piterberg, an electoral expert at UNESCO and the lead instructor of this course. Today in this module, we will analyze the impact of harmful practices on elections and the possible responses to tackle and mitigate their negative effects. We will review the diverse strategies and techniques used to spread disinformation, misinformation, hate speech, and other harmful practices. We will talk about the main targets of disinformation within the electoral cycle, and we will start to see how to articulate solutions and responses to these challenges. For that, we will need to revise the link between the electoral cycle, the electoral calendar, and the operational plan.

[00:01:27] First of all, we need to be familiarized with the strategies and techniques to spread disinformation. There are many, but we will address five of the main strategies to spread disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. We will see Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB), information operations and influence campaigns, the computational amplification of disinformation, false or misleading narratives, and misleading visual content. Let's start by Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior. Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior takes place when actors coordinate among themselves to mislead people regarding who they are and what they're doing. This method has been widely exploited for political gain worldwide in recent years. Coordinated inauthentic behavior online can make use of fake profiles, anonymous users, trolls, and bots. These elements can individually harass, provoke or intimidate other real users. The different goals of coordinated inauthentic behavior are: to generate more traffic and or to silence certain opinions, depending on the motivations of the instigators, to influence public opinions, and ultimately impact decision-making—something that is particularly sensitive during electoral processes—. But what is a troll? Basically, a troll is a person or a user that systematically harasses other users online. For that, it can be considered a troll. These kinds of users provoke, disturb, and attack other users with digital tools, with a view to creating a strong reaction or silence people. Trolls seek out emotional responses and often are hidden behind anonymity.

[00:03:41] Another way of distributing disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation is called information operations. Information operations entail the collection of tactical information and dissemination of propaganda in order to try to gain a competitive advantage. A similar concept is that of influence campaigns that try to achieve a strategic and/or geopolitical outcome, like an electoral result.

[00:04:15] The computational amplification of disinformation with micro-targeting bots or fake accounts tries to promote and share certain kinds of content. So these amplification impacts, for instance, in what we saw during the first module, the viral contents, can be part of our computational amplification of disinformation. And also, we need to understand the concept of micro-targeting here. But, what is micro-targeting? It's a new form of political advertisement that typically involves monitoring people's online behavior and using the collected data—related to the concept of "Big Data" that we saw in module one—sometimes enriched with other data and displays individually targeted advertisements or content or propaganda.

[00:05:24] False or misleading narratives aim to pass as news articles or documentary content to look like real content. They are really published to mislead, deceive or give incorrect information with the idea of creating, confusing ideas, or destabilizing the users, and these include ideological extreme, hyper-partisan, or conspirational content as well as various forms of propaganda. In order to catch your attention, the false or misleading narratives are often accompanied by videos, photos, excessive capitalization, emotionally charged words and pictures, and also of logical fallacies. We have seen many of these strategies for disseminating disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation during the COVID pandemic. But what about misleading visual content? Much of the information that circulates on social media, on the Internet, and on platforms is visual—photos, videos, and memes—and that can be particularly persuasive. Visual content is more often shared and favored over text by social platform algorithms. In addition, humans process visual content faster, often leading to emotional responses, which diminishes the probability for them to use analytical skills. Furthermore, it can be up to impossible to trace the source of some images.

[00:07:15] So, we have already seen what the main strategies of dissemination are, and now we will take a look at the main targets of disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation during the electoral cycle. First of all, we would say that one of the main targets is electoral management bodies, electoral regulators, electoral-related governmental institutions, and other electoral stakeholders. The goal is very simple: to discredit the electoral institutions and undermine and interfere with the electoral process. These can go from spreading misleading information about the voter registration process to challenging the independence and transparency of a given electoral commission, even announcing fake results that may stipulate on the networks, or denouncing imaginary fraud.

[00:07:17] Another objective of disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation campaigns are the candidates. This aims to dissuade political actors from running as candidates or to bully them into making them resign. False information about women candidates spreads faster and more intensely than disinformation about men candidates. Gender bias disinformation is often used to shame and deter women from participating in politics or even going to vote. Another target of disinformation and misinformation campaigns, of course, depending on the electoral system, can be political parties, political groups, or even independent candidates. Depending on the electoral system and the legal framework, some political parties, candidates, or political groups might have fewer resources for their political campaigns than others. Of course, this depends on the country and the context, and the legal framework. But that makes some political actors more vulnerable than other actors. Because if there are actors that can invest more money and more resources in disinformation and misinformation campaigns to undermine the other candidates, this can create an imbalance in the political equation and inequality in access to political participation, too. So, disinformation might be not only a way of creating political propaganda and influencing the voters but also destabilizing and generating inequality between different candidates and different political groups. When [disinformation] targets minorities or members of vulnerable groups, it's basically to dissuade people from particular groups from running as candidates or to make them resign if they are already candidates. Vulnerable groups might be targeted during elections by disinformation, also seeking to fuel intolerance and social polarization. When [these campaigns] target journalists, media outlets, and citizen journalists, the goal most of the time is to undermine the media's reputation and journalists' reputation and to discredit them so that the information shared by them is going to be discredited. Among these targets, women journalists face gender-specific risks besides those already suffered by everyone. So they

are also more vulnerable to reputation attacks or the use of private information to destabilize or discredit them. When the citizens and voters, in general, are the targets of these campaigns, the goal is also to manipulate them in order to influence their decisions: either to go to vote, not to go to vote, or simply have the fear that something is going to happen, to deter voters from going to the polling centers or to participate as political agents or as polling staff, etc. Again, there are differences between how women and how men can be influenced or reached by this kind of propaganda and manipulation.

[00:12:24] We will continue with module three after a short break. See you in 5.

[00:12:33] Well, let's continue. I'm happy to see you back. Now we are going to talk a little bit about the electoral calendar. Every electoral cycle is translated into a complete electoral calendar. The electoral calendar informs all stakeholders of the key dates for a given electoral process. The electoral cycle approach and the electoral calendars are the keystones of an electoral management operational plan and the pillars for planning electoral-related actions and activities, including the initiatives to prevent and tackle disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech. Electoral operational planning is usually done by the electoral authorities, and it shows how and when each activity is going to be carried out. Each activity needs to be targeted at the objectives stated in a strategic way and then be reflected on the budget. Having adequate financial resources is critical not only for implementation but also to be prepared for contingencies.

[00:13:43] We will now see how to tackle disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. But for that, we need to have in mind not only the idea of the electoral cycle but the fact that this electoral cycle is going to be adapted to a particular electoral calendar, and all operations will be put in place after strategic planning. So the ways to tackle disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation need to be integrated into this operational planning process in advance. First of all, to implement solutions, I'm looking for measures and ways to tackle misinformation and disinformation campaigns, and hate speech, and everyone needs to be involved at every level. Effective measures require a range of responses for multiple actors. Measures can have different levels of impact and be designed for short, medium, and long-term periods. Responses to tackle disinformation can be organized into four categories: 1. Preventive measures; 2. Identification, fact-checking, and monitoring measures; 3. Regulatory and non-regulatory measures; 4. Corrective or containing corrective measures. Preventive measures are things that we can do before. Having all the information we have been looking through the last three modules, we know there are different kinds of challenges that we will need to face when preparing for a particular electoral cycle. So during the preventive measures and in relation to the knowledge we already have. Identification and monitoring measures can take place once the processes are already in place. And containing corrective measures can also be implemented during that period. After that part, which usually coincides with the post-electoral period, we will try to revise regulatory and non-regulatory measures and start strategizing for the next electoral period.

[00:16:15] Let's do a recap of module three. During this module, we have addressed: the strategies and techniques to spread disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. The main targets of disinformation within the electoral cycle; the relevance of the electoral calendar and its connection with the electoral cycle; why electoral operational planning is critical for electoral processes and to tackle disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation; and which are the four categories that group most of the main responses to tackle this issue. In the next module, we will continue to examine in detail the four

categories of responses, and we will, in particular, focus on the preventive ones. Thank you very much for being there. See you next week in module four, bye.