Module 1: Presentation by Glen Mashinini, Chairperson - Electoral Commission of South Africa

[00:00:18] **Speaker 1** Welcome, and best wishes to the participants of the online course on "The Information and Elections in The Digital Era," which is being organized with Unesco and the University of Texas Knights Center for Journalism. Ladies and gentlemen, in this presentation, will be covering the following aspects of the topic: the digital revolution as one of the biggest innovations in our lifetime, the evolution of communications, and the media continuum – as illustrated by the graphic underneath: TV, radio, print, online and digital. And this, on the left-hand side, depicts our traditional media, and on the right-hand side, depicts the digital revolutionary, a period of communication media. Further, it will also touch on the role of election management bodies that you referred to as the EMBs and then the impact of the new media on elections in the digital era. Lastly, one will also then share the South African experience.

[00:01:57] As already indicated, the media is classified and categorized as traditional and, on the other side, as digital. In this new information paradigm, the traditional media are represented by radio, billboards, or television. On the other hand, the digital era being digital publications, online, emails, search engine optimization, e-commerce, e-platforms, as well as, most importantly, the social media [00:02:33]offerings, [0.0s] the features in Instagram that we now have seen the proliferation throughout the world. Now, as EMB, we have a role in looking at this from a strategic and operational point of view and in seeing to what extent what does this bring to our environment and to us. This evolution has led to new multimedia communication strategies in our communication, especially when dealing with campaigns, education activities, the training, the marketing, the media relations, advertising, promotions, and outreach programs.

[00:03:23] One of the ways for us to conceptually be in a position to dissect the impact and what this new media means for us as an EMB is to look at simply the strengths and the opportunities that are brought by this medium. And, with these strengths and opportunities, being in a position to then adapt the medium or the digital revolution, and how do we leverage those particular strengths. On the other side, the weaknesses and the threats that come along with any new technology, such as this digital revolution, is to look closely at the weaknesses and to look closely at the threats. And with respect to that, our role as the EMB is to see how we can mitigate those things so that we can adapt our communication campaigns and activities while enjoying the benefit of the strengths and weaknesses that this thing brings. Having spoken on the first aspect of the topic, which is understanding the digital revolution and the media continuum as well as the expansive area in which now we find ourselves or what we enjoy from each digital revolution as EMBs.

[00:05:14] It's important to recap, what is the role of the EMBs and, therefore, as an EMB, how do you leverage this opportunity, and how do you mitigate against it? Firstly, I think the EMBs [00:05:30]are, in nature, creatures [2.3s] of their constitution and the laws of each country. The elections must be conducted within the legal prescript at all times. The elections must be under conditions conducive to free and fairness. And these EMBs are governed by domestic, regional, continental, and international regulations, protocols, guidelines and best practices. In this case, you can think of the United Nations, we can think of the African Union, and also, in our region, we have SADC. And in our country, we have quite a number of protocols and regulations that we have to comply with, including our electoral act.

[00:06:17] Further to that, as institutions interact within a broader society and environment, we are also subscribed to principles, norms, standards, and values. [00:06:29]And among those is [1.6s] access to information as well as empowering people with information. The power of media and the power of information is something that is critical in this environment at any and at all given times, also to act in a transparent manner and with inclusivity. In this case, we have a large number of different stakeholders ranging from NGOs in our society to political stakeholders, as well as the members of the public. And all those particular stakeholders must [00:07:06]have paper [0.2s] throughout the value chain of activities [00:07:10]and up to the [1.8s] ultimate stage, which is the acceptance of the results. And this then becomes important that we factor it throughout our processes. And the ultimate test, as well, is that as an EMB, you have to [00:07:27]evaluate [0.0s] elections, and they must be seen to have been free, fair, and credible. As well as, all stakeholders must acknowledge that these were conducted with impeccable integrity and whose outcomes are also accepted by all the parties. And one of the things that I will emphasize here is that we know that the major cause of countries around the world is the contested electoral results.

[00:07:58] Bearing that in mind, it is important that I share with you, firstly, in terms of the EMB, what exactly is its electoral cycle. Now the electoral cycle of an EMB simply covers three stages in a broad sense, but it is also important to acknowledge that these are not compartmentalized. They are interactive activities throughout that particular cycle. But what we do acknowledge is that these categories would be your pre-election activities as well as the voting and electoral period, and then lastly is the post-electoral period. And now, if you conceptually see this, juxtaposing the cycle against the critical communication and media activities that an EMB would typically undertake at the different stages that I've outlined earlier, you then would note that there are probably about four or five key components that we need to adapt to the digital era and digital revolution.

[00:09:36] These activities include, for example, stakeholder management. In this, we [00:09:42]liaise [0.0s] and communicate with all the political contestants and political parties. We also interact with the general members of our society to start leadership webinars and exchanges. This also includes the public campaign's way of bringing the protesting citizenry to understand the plans and activities leading to the election and even after the election. We also have extensive activities in terms of education, voter education, civic education, as well as the general outreach of all the various communities in that process, which is very fundamental for us to make sure that the messages and the information that we're disseminating do actually also get transmitted through the proliferation of the digital technologies and platforms that we have identified and indicated earlier on in the presentation. And lastly, we need also to train people. We have internal teams of personnel that must be trained so that they have a standardized understanding of operational procedures and activities.

[00:11:06] Similarly, we need also to train our stakeholders. We work with the political parties, and they bring their political party agents. We work also with observers, we provide training. So all these can best be achieved by using digital technology, because, for some of the activities that you do in training or especially of your presiding officers and the voting station personnel, you only have probably about 5 to 7 days to prepare and be able to deploy those people. So the medium of digital media really is for us a major tool or friend in us achieving those objectives. Similarly, when you move to issues of political stakeholders, their registration is now electronic, the candidate nomination processes... This is important because it now spares us having to chop to many trees and having

people coming in to bring piles and piles of documents. This can now be done and just in time using the digital platforms.

[00:12:17] And we also have to demarcate [00:12:19]and take inside [0.5s] the voting station and disseminate information about where and when those things will be taking place and logistics and the plans to ensure that the voting experience is at an optimal and professional level. It is also on us to adapt and be able to incorporate digital tools so that we are in a position to deliver a world-class and a first-class electronic experience to our country. And on voting day, we have critical steps and activities such as observation, voting operations and counting. These particular steps and activities it's important they remain visible, transparent, and inclusive in terms of how we conduct them for the political parties and for the members of the public, as well as the opinion makers in our country.

[00:13:15] So digital tools are also being deployed quite extensively to make sure that people have a clear understanding of the processes and [00:13:27]the buy-in [0.0s] and all the stages to minimize misinformation and obstruction and to minimize situations where people can actually manipulate the electoral results. So digital technology is a major tool that we have used. And finally and ultimately, the announcement of the results; so the tallying processes, the consolidation of the results at the [00:13:59]Central Center. [1.4s] The auditing and verification of those results and the transmission to the members of the public become a very crucial stage. In fact, we have seen in the continent that after elections have been deemed to have been conducted freely and fairly, some of the elections have been challenged and has been lost in the constitutional court on the grounds on basis that their wish and shortcomings with respect to the issue of the results, whether it's in their transmission, it's in their verification or otherwise. But this component is the most determining of all the measures, in fact, it's the ultimate test of whether the elections will be successful or not. And finally, there's the [00:14:53]postmortem [0.0s] and the rolling back of what one has to do. But in this electoral cycle, at any given time, one or more of the various tools and platforms are utilized by the EMBs to ensure that the stakeholders, marketing and communication, education and training are being conducted properly.

[00:15:19] Now, ladies and gentlemen, one has shared broadly what is digital technology and what does it bring to an EMB environment? Now, one would like to use this to share the South African experience. We just had a local government election last November 2021, and there are a number of things that we are able to share with you. Among those things is that the digital and social media were key channels for communicating the IEC SA's 2021 Municipal Election Campaign information. And our campaign can be categorized as that it comprised of three components. Firstly, our initial awareness launch recorded over 16.6 million impressions across key local content news and lifestyle websites. We use the "Please Call Me" alerts and SMSes. The second phase was the registration campaign, which was between September 2021, and again, we had a modest 27 million impressions across key social media and news and lifestyle websites that we experienced in that country for registration. And then lastly, we also had the election campaign, and this campaign then recorded a significant level of exposure and engagement in a very short time with over 60 million impressions and over 1 million engagements, largely across key news and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Vodacom and Wi-Fi banner adverts. The other experience that we enjoyed is that in South Africa, a total of 14 million people were reached during the television broadcast, with the viewers exposed to voter education messages an average of four times. Significantly, the percentage reach achieved against the youth or young adult target market segment was at a level that achieved with other broader populations. The

important thing is that we are now beginning to see that we are reaching young people, who our indication is that some of them have moved more into social media than television. So this enables us to achieve that. And during the social media campaign, Facebook had the greatest reach of 8.3 million, followed by Twitter, which hit about 4.4 million. And in the third place was Instagram, with a reach of about 1.2 million.

[00:18:23] We also recorded some social successes, you know, in which the impact of social media strategy was significant in the sense that between June and November, leading to the local government election, the IEC enjoyed the following engagements on social media. Among them is that our young were highly engaged on Twitter, and we saw nearly a quarter of a million young people engaged on Twitter. And also, a highly engaged Facebook following of 370,000 followers. The Commission's introductory presence on the Instagram photo-sharing platform achieved a 5000 mark, while its presence on Linkedin grew by 70% to over 1900 followers. And also we enjoyed a fun collaboration with Tik-Tok, which has about 9 million users, most of whom are our young people. And we also saw the platform flighting an information page for its South African users with a redirect to our own Electoral Commission's website.

[00:19:50] Now, in all of this, there are a number of things that we can share from our observations to inform the way forward and the discourse among the practitioners. In observation, one of the things is the digital divide, which is seeing the communications being either or between the traditional communication tools versus the digital. We, as the IEC, strive to be at the forefront of digital communication because we see that as a boom for us, but at the same time, yes, we are aware that it does bring with it certain risks associated with the threats and the weaknesses. But we are committed to employing social media because of its immediacy; it's demonstrated immediacy, cost-effectiveness and responsiveness, especially in our target communities. And this has been substantiated with the outcomes of the South African Human Science Research Counsel's 2021 Election Satisfaction Survey, which we conduct every election as an exit poll in our country. Almost 48% of the voters who were interviewed in these elections perceived social media as a useful source of information. While 50% of the population perceived the traditional communication campaign as also a useful source of information. So this is evenly balanced. Accordingly, we continue to invest in campaigns on traditional media, such as television, radio, especially local media – radio, print, and outdoor media. Even older messaging technologies like SMS to reach those voters who simply don't have access to technology and data or who actually prefer those mediums for comprehensive information and join social media for social activities and entertainment. And for us, therefore, it just illustrates today's norm, which is this approach to communicating with our stakeholders. Hence the adoption of the conceptual understanding that this is a continuum rather than a situation of ideal for us to reach our voters and citizens.

[00:22:34] The other thing that you can say we've observed in our country and the world is the power of social media. Today social media is a force to be reckoned with. It has become pervasive in all human information endeavors and has drastically changed the media landscape. It has become one of the official channels through which governments communicate with citizens. We saw that, during the period of the pandemic, when the government was distributing support and assistance to communities, this became a very useful platform. And also, increasingly, we've seen internationally and in our country that is at the heart of the political party campaign before, during, and after the elections. The politicians have used this quite strongly. I mean, we saw this with Obama's success in his campaign, but also it was taken to the next level by Donald Trump. And we have also seen in our country that the political parties are using it quite extensively. So it is now a new

terrain where political parties have taken to this medium, like "fish to water" in their battle for the hearts and minds of the voters. And, you know, similarly or inevitably, this also has now led to us as the EMB to actually embrace and adapt to these new developments.

[00:24:21] In all of this, as you know, early on indicated in our [00:24:26]SWOT [0.0s] analysis that this advent of the digital revolution is a mixed bag. It brings with it trends and opportunities. On the other hand, it carries weaknesses and threats, and those things can catapult electoral management appointees and the election unless their EMBs remain firmly vigilant throughout the activities to a number of threats and weaknesses. And in this case, I'll touch on maybe three aspects. The first one is disinformation, and you then require mitigation trends. Through digital platforms, they manifest as one of the greatest threats to the freeness, fairness, and credibility of elections the world over. And disinformation is also what is defined as false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed to cause harm intentionally. And within an election context, this includes false information intended to affect participation in the outcomes of elections unduly. We know elections are high stakes, so manipulation and disinformation have become pervasive. And therefore, mitigating this threat during the general election and in our government elections every day, we had to actually put a structured approach to it where we brought in non-governmental organizations such as Media Monitoring Africa, together with the social media platforms–Facebook, Google, Twitter, Tik-Tok, to come together to come up with a plan as to how we will deal with this war over disinformation. You know, it's something that we have to enforce. It's being compliant with us because the electoral code and election laws Require that at any given time, there shouldn't be prejudicial information about any kind of debate.

[00:26:49] And in conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, we need to, therefore, as EMBs and practitioners in this area, manage the threat and the weaknesses, but among others, make sure that we put mitigating plans. And it's a crucial imperative of the EMBs to be vigilant about the security of the voters' role–to take steps to protect the data and electoral processes, in addition to the reputations of the EMBs. It's priceless that trust in the information is crucial in the process that enables citizens to make informed choices. And the war on disinformation and the adaptation of EMBs to the digital revolution for us is a critical strategic imperative that all EMBs should endeavor to succeed in. And we wish the participant in the course well and look forward to their positive and constructive contribution as active citizens and practitioners in their respective countries. Thank you.