

## Module 2: Looking at harmful practices on social media and their impact on democratic governance and on electoral processes

[00:00:18] **Speaker 1** Hi. My name is near Coniston. I'm the senior adviser for Information Integrity at UNDP's Oslo Governance Center. I'll be facilitating the second part of module two, looking at harmful practices on social media and elsewhere, and their impact on democratic governance and on electoral processes. More specifically, before we delve into the subject of this session, I want to take a moment to define the term information pollution. The information ecosystem can be polluted and manipulated in many different ways. We use the term disinformation to describe false, misleading or manipulated content. But content isn't the full problem. Harmful and deceptive practices that promote disinformation are also damaging the information ecosystem. These include troll factories, fake accounts, automated accounts and other ways to falsely amplify content. Are online trends. At UNDP, we are deeply concerned by the impact of information pollution on accountable, inclusive and effective governance and on social cohesion. We see it undermining the legitimacy of democratic processes, degrading and distorting public debate online and offline, and hampering women's participation in politics. It erodes trust in government institutions and media and widens existing, existing social and political divides. It also increases marginalization of already excluded groups. So looking specifically at elections, how does information pollution impact the electoral process? Well, open exchange of opposing opinions and ideas during elections is fundamental to democracy. As political contests and elections require space for competing ideas, they call for a level playing field for a broad spectrum of political beliefs. However, today's information ecosystem is no longer enabling this critical exchange. Equipped with increasingly sophisticated digital tools and tactics, it intentioned actors are spreading false, misleading and manipulated content to influence electoral outcomes, to foment discontent, to promote polarization, or to de-legitimize election processes. This can heighten the risk of rejection of election results, political and social unrest, and even electoral violence and threats to disrupt elections. Aren't you? But they have modernized and they're now amplified by low cost, easily accessible digital technologies. This is a problem which is increasing in severity with each passing electoral cycle, as it's a relatively new and very complex challenge. Electoral authorities in many places have not yet built the systems and mechanisms needed to detect and respond to this behavior online. And many political actors are willing to take the risk of using information pollution tactics if it ups their chances of gaining power. Not only that, but political disinformation has become a thriving industry. There are now PR and marketing firms that can provide this service to anyone with the means to pay for it. Furthermore, many states are themselves sponsoring political disinformation. Let's first look at three common online tactics and the impact they can have. In what way can ill intentioned actors use information pollution to disrupt the electoral process? These aren't exhaustive, and they often overlap with each other and with other propaganda tactics, but they are some of the ones that we see most often. The first is micro targeted political advertising. Online political advertising has boomed in the last 15 years. Barack Obama was the first presidential candidate in the U.S. to make substantial use of social media advertising. He spent \$16 million on online advertising in 2008. In the 2020 election, the combined spending on online offered advertising was 1.6 billion. The challenge with political advertising is that it can be used as a vehicle for disinformation and it can be targeted at certain groups and not others. So what I see and what you see are not the same thing. Political actors can reach small groups of voters based on gender, location, religion, economic class and many other variables. These micro targeted ads have been used to spread confusion about registration and voting procedures and to de-legitimize the electoral process among certain groups. The second tactic is astroturfing. This is falsely amplifying content to create an impression of

widespread support for a policy, a candidate or a political party. Even though little such support exists, political actors can falsely inflate an issue. Are the. Our own popularity, our target and opponents. They can do this through automated accounts called bots are through fake or hijacked. Accounts are often a coordinated combination of all of those. This is used to mislead the public into believing that the position is a commonly held view. It distorts public opinion and therefore it distorts public debate, bringing fringe issues to the fore. It also can reduce the quality of the public debate by pitting groups against each other and increasing polarization. The third tactic is gendered disinformation. Political actors are increasingly using gendered disinformation to target female critics and opponents. Research shows that women in politics are disproportionately targeted by disinformation, including false stories, threats, comments about physical appearance and humiliating images. This is intended to paint female politicians and candidates as under-qualified, untrustworthy, unintelligent are too emotional to hold public office. Gendered disinformation discourages women from running for office and can reinforce negative stereotypes about women. The impact of gendered disinformation is even more severe for women from racial, ethnic or religious minorities. And of course, when women are being pushed out of politics and leadership, it is a sign of democratic backsliding and a serious human rights concern. All of these tactics can contribute to disrupting democratic elections. So what does the disinformation look like when it reaches voters? Well, it can be anything. It can be YouTube, conspiracy theories, memes or videos. False or manipulated news stories. Comments on a Twitter feed. Ads in a Facebook feed are even fake fact checking websites. But by the time disinformation bubbles to the surface and is being shared on open Internet sites, is probably being circulated in other closed forums for some time. It's also important to know that more and more disinformation is moving away from publicly accessible areas of the Internet and into closed spaces like WhatsApp groups and private Facebook groups which which are harder to track and more difficult to address. So what can be done to protect voters? Well, there are certainly currently regulatory gaps in regards to addressing electoral disinformation. But that doesn't mean that you can't respond to it as election practitioners, depending on your mandate and potential added value. So here are some options that can help strengthen your understanding and response. First of all, this is a new world, a new information order. Be prepared and skills to communicate in it. This may require capacity building and data literacy, online monitoring and effective online communication strategies. It's important to make sure that you have these skills in your team are that you can access them. Monitor the online information landscape and keep track of emerging narratives so that you can respond to them before they gain traction. UNDP and others have developed and are testing digital tools for social listening, disinformation, monitoring and fact checking. These are specifically designed for election settings. Educate voters about the risks online and provide them with advice on how to avoid being deceived by these tactics. Building public resilience to information pollution is critical. Understand her voters are getting their information from and build strong partnerships with trusted information sources, sources such as within the media. National statistics officers are community leaders. If possible, talk to the social media companies in advance of the elections. Understand what they can encounter to highlight any risks you see and offer ways to engage with you. Encourage codes of conduct for political parties, media or others. Codes of conduct can define how political parties candidates are. The media should behave during the electoral period and also kind of hold them accountable to that. But remember that interventions cannot restrict the right to freedom of expression and opinion. Partial or full Internet shutdowns, restrictions on media and other such responses only contribute to further public distrust and vulnerability to untrustworthy information sources. And finally, it's easy to feel overwhelmed by such a complicated problem. But there are global conversations happening now to try to provide better guidance to election practitioners and others on

how to deal with it. UNDP is currently leading an Action Coalition on Information Integrity in Elections, which aims to identify best practice and programmatic guidance, particularly around the use of digital technologies. We're also creating a knowledge hub of effective programmatic responses. Other electoral support stakeholders are doing similar work, and we hope that in the near future there would be much more clarity on what works and how these can be adapted to different contexts. Thank you so much for listening.