Module 2: The role of the media in tackling disinformation and misinformation by Patrícia Campos Mello, journalist

[00:00:18] **Speaker 1** Many populist leaders worldwide are using technology, especially the Internet, to maintain supporters in parallel information ecosystem. I first interviewed Steve Bannon, former White House chief strategist, back in October 2018. At the time, he said that were not for Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms, it would have been 100 times more difficult for populism to rise because populists would not be able to overcome the barrier of the traditional media. Bypassing the filter of traditional media and communicating directly with supporters through social media is essential to digital populists such as Jide Bolsonaro in Brazil, Rodrigo Duterte Ritchie in the Philippines, not in the Modi in India, and Donald Trump in the U.S. and many others in attacking traditional media and discrediting journalists as part of the strategy of establishing a direct channel with supporters with no fact checking, no questioning, and no accountability. Election coverage in a digital scenario is a big challenge for journalists. Disinformation strategies are constantly changing, and so is technology. Also, electoral legislation struggles to keep up with the new possibilities of propaganda and disinformation. Online journalists need to monitor the social media accounts of officeholders and candidates. We need to monitor online political advertising on matters ad library and Google ad transparency and check if they follow local legislation. We must investigate how bad actors bypass electoral legislation, used third parties to advertise on Internet platforms and create anonymous websites to spread disinformation. And we also need to monitor CrowdTangle to identify emerging disinformation campaigns on social media. We have to monitor as well. WhatsApp public groups and Telegram channels and public groups to identify the narratives that are going viral and what kind of disinformation campaigns are gaining steam. It is very easy to disguise one's identity online. So there needs to be a lot of digital forensics to determine who the real owners of the websites are and what images and videos are manipulated. All the while, we must be careful. We journalists have a challenge how to investigate digital campaigns and disinformation and report on them without amplifying disinformation. In Brazil, for instance, there's a sizable Bolsonaro's information ecosystem, an ecosystem of supporters and information that supports President Bolsonaro. It has a significant influence on public opinion. The Bolsonaro is the information ecosystem has several components. First, there are the social media accounts of President Bolsonaro. His sense what politicians and his main allies. The generally content that is amplified by a massive network of extreme right wing YouTubers, bloggers and digital influencers. Most analysts created and continue to create hundreds of thousands of WhatsApp and Telegram groups where they spread pro-government content coming from Bolsonaro, social media accounts and YouTubers and bloggers and disinformation about political opponents. The electoral system. Polling institutes. And the mainstream media. These groups also circulated links to junk news sites, hundreds of websites that present themselves as regular journalistic sites but are spreading propaganda. The junk news sites have a vast audience. 48.2 million visits in July 2022 alone, according to SIMILARWEB. That's a wider reach than many mainstream media websites and more than double the audience of the sites identified with the progressives. Most sites are anonymous, present themselves as biased and proliferate like gremlins. According to the leading fact checking agencies in Brazil. They also have a very high circulation of disinformation. And last but not least, the Bolsonaro echo system also includes TV networks, though not the leading one global, which is seen as the enemy. At the same time, Wilson and his allies have been delegitimizing mainstream media since day one in the administration, saying they are old, left wing and favor communism. The president also urges people not to watch certain TV networks and not to read the three prominent newspapers. Instead, they should get their information from trusted sources, both on the websites, YouTubers, bloggers and the

government symbols, and that is to strive to maintain their supporters in a parallel information universe. President Jair Bolsonaro and his main allies have used this ecosystem to sow doubts about the electoral process. The Brazilian version of Stop the Steal includes the legitimizing the electronic voting machines, saying that they cannot be audited and therefore results are not trustworthy. On top of that, there's also polling denialism, a large amount of disinformation, discrediting the leading polling institutes circulated on WhatsApp Telegram groups and YouTube channels. It says that the polling institutes favored the left and that the only trustworthy poll is not the people's data. Basically, pictures and videos showing many people in those are not Israelis. And they also promote less credible polls and Internet instant polls as if they were accurate polls. While covering this complex digital scenario, we also must deal with increasing attacks. Censorship in this new world does not require the suppression of information. Populist leaders flood social media, messaging apps and the Internet with the version of facts they want to prevail so that it drowns out investigations and negative news. So the so-called censorship by noise. Then for that manipulation of public opinion to succeed, these digital populist leaders need to delegitimize professional journalism, to neutralize journalism defamation campaigns against journalists and media outlets that keep the government in check. It's a new form of censorship outsourced to trolls, bloggers, influencers. These aggressions have nothing to do with fair and welcome criticism. Journalists make mistakes, and we should correct them and be accountable. Nor is it the traditional animosity between governments and watchdogs. Journalists are also under systematic judicial harassment, bombarded with the so called slaps, strategic lawsuits against public participation. The situation is especially critical for female journalists. We are target of defamation campaigns, stimulated and amplified by the government much more frequently than our male colleagues. We have our parents and our children intimidated. Our appearance marked our addresses and phone numbers exposed. And we are subject to violent threats both online and in the real world. I have been the target of this hate machine since 2018, when I started writing about the political use of WhatsApp and other disinformation tools to manipulate public opinion. It's a double challenge, investigating increasingly complex disinformation strategies while enduring online harassment and attacks against the credibility we face and fair competition. Disinformation goes viral. Accurate information does not. But I think that if we keep on investigating and we don't let attacks intimidate us, there's a chance journalists can burst these disinformation bubbles. That's my hope.