

The relevance of Fact Checking during Elections

[00:00:18] **Speaker 1** My name is Alphonse Shiundu. I am the Kenyan editor for Africa Check. I have been working as a journalist and editor for the last 15 years, tackling different aspects of public policy, politics, and the legislature. Now, this massive open online course is good because it's coming at a time when we have just finished the 2022 Kenyan presidential election. And there are other countries in the world that are gearing up for elections, like Brazil in late September or early October or Nigeria early next year. So as you wind up the electoral season and prepare for another round. I think it's a great place for us to speak about misinformation, to speak about disinformation, and all the things that are related to that. In this course, you will hear a lot about misinformation, disinformation, and even a concept known as malinformation. You can also hear a lot about political propaganda. And what I can say is that when people speak about these things, they are referring to a whole spectrum of false information, from gossip or rumors all the way to deliberately created false information, which is put out there with the intention to mislead. So I would quickly define some of these concepts so that when we mention misinformation, when we mention disinformation, we mention malinformation. We all know what we are talking about.

[00:02:04] What is misinformation? This is when someone shares a piece of information without knowing that it is false or misleading. Usually, it could be a tiny little forward on social media, such as a video or a picture showing a politician saying something funny or saying something scary or incendiary. The instinct for the person sharing it is usually not to verify first but to pass it around. Usually, the people sharing it don't know whether it's true or not, so they do not know that they do not know. So they put out misinformation. It's unintentional. On the other hand, we have disinformation and which is when someone deliberately shares a piece of false or misleading information with the intention to mislead. For example, someone can falsely claim that a political candidate has been arrested or defected to a rival party so as to mislead the supporters, sow apathy, or even lay the groundwork for voter suppression. The last concept for me to define is malinformation. And this is when genuine information is shared to cause harm because, say, the correct information is exaggerated in a way that misleads or causes harm, probably because the information is being used out of context. Think of information leaks where information designed to stay private or secret, or confidential suddenly ends up in the public sphere. It's interpreted out of context, and in that, it turns out to be false or misleading. Therefore, how does false information itself manifest during elections? The experience of Africa Check and of the different countries that we operate on the continent of Africa—in Nigeria, in Senegal, in South Africa, and in Kenya—is that false information manifests in different ways. One of those ways is to fake newspaper front pages, which are fabricated with false stories about political parties, candidates, and policies, and then they are put out there and seen on social media. The other is about fabricated videos, which some could just be slowed down to show a public figure as, say, drunk, or they are edited to make them say incendiary things, silly statements, or even deep-fakes—when you see public figures saying things they would not ordinarily say. These are powered by machine learning, deep learning, and artificial intelligence in a way. We've also seen manipulated broadcasts, news broadcasts that are manipulated, either the caption is edited and the kind of content, the video clips the audio is "inserted." And this leads to very, very fake content. And then we have doctored photos once we see they are photoshopped. We have made up stories on social media, the stuff of conspiracies. We have screenshots of fake social media posts and fabricated text chats. We also have sponsored hashtags, which in this case, the social media companies call these "inauthentic coordinated actions," where there is a kind of astroturfing to rig the trending topics algorithms on social media so that once they become

trending topics on social media, the expectation is they would end up as a news agenda. And, of course, we have public statements that are unverified, which are made by public figures, either the politicians in the campaign or their spokespeople. A lot of it is an exaggeration of the achievements or reluctant politicians, the string of opponents, and such things.

[00:06:42] Who are the actors that spread misinformation? We have tried to group these actors into four types of categories. So we think of them as, say, the freelancers who are hired to create a frame or online seed narratives. We sometimes call them: "keyboard militias"; sometimes, we call them "keyboard warriors." But these are freelancers who are either allied with the government, with the opposition, or available to both groups depending on the highest bidder. So we have this group of people, and then we have scammers and fraudsters who pretend and say, for example, a candidate is recruiting people, and then they ask you to give some money to get recruited, and people get scammed, and they get conned that way. Some say they are giving campaign merchandise, and they ask you to pay for a delivery, and once you have paid the money, it never comes back. And then those who run fake popularity contests with prizes, and there are others who present themselves as opinion pollsters, and they con candidates and political parties out of their money, pretending that they are going to organize opinion polls. We also have among the actors who spread false information to public figures, politicians, and political parties. And this, as we have mentioned before, seeks to smear the opponents, spin their way out of their failures, out of the shortcomings in their public record or exaggerate their achievements. And then lastly, we have the mainstream and community media, which inadvertently, in the speed to break the news, end up publishing unverified information. So in the form of political campaigns in a polarized country, this becomes very dangerous for stability, it erodes public trust in the media, and it makes the media targets for offline and online attacks of claims of bias and of having taken sides. Sometimes this also happens when rumors are incited during radio-call-in shows, and these cannot be verified, but they get repeated by subsequent callers. So we have to ask, why does false information spread far and wide during elections, is it because the ground is fertile for false information, or is it because people do not check? But what I can say from the fact-checking that we have done for some time is that the art of political propaganda is as old as democracy itself. So in such a competition, as people pursue power, they will do everything to sell their agenda to voters to make their opponents lose votes. So this pursuit of power is one of the reasons why misinformation spreads, and we've seen politicians in different countries sharing obviously false statistics, obviously false videos, and audio content, and information painting the opponents, for example, as warmongers, as thieves, as liars. So the art of political propaganda is one of the reasons. It's like thinking of propaganda as one of the toolkits that politicians are trying to mainstream across the world to push their agenda. Unfortunately, a lot of this is packaged in a way that is sometimes incendiary, in a way that is sometimes misleading, or in a way that is sometimes very, very unsettling and scary to communities and to people and to the citizens and to the voters. In Africa, during elections, we tend to have official sources or public figures in public offices who tend to be assigned automatic credibility because of the legitimacy of the offices. So many people tend to believe that just because something is official, then it must be true, and that is often the case. And politicians often, especially the incumbents, have learned to use the power of incumbency to mislead, to put out wrong figures about the achievements. The next motivation for why false information spreads is money. So as report after report has shown on the continent, in Kenya, political campaigns pay people, pay companies and hire funds to create and spread false information. We saw it in Kenya in 2013 and in 2017 with the now-defunct Cambridge Analytica. And in 2022, we saw a similar modus operandi being deployed to create or pollute the electoral

environment. This isn't likely to stop, as there is a whole disinformation industry that is thriving in Kenya, which is sustained and powered by political disinformation. And lastly, we have digital literacy, so this is one of the things that we must tackle so that people understand how to spot false information, how to verify disputed information before they share, before it is forwarded as received or before it retreats, and how to disrupt and why they need to disrupt the flow of false information. So people have to understand that having a smartphone also requires you to understand the algorithmic nature of how the Internet works. Across points related to the low numbers point is about the connected individuals. And in the continent of Africa, especially in the rural areas, there are very few people connected to smartphones. So you find that a person who's connected to their smartphone becomes the latest source of news via WhatsApp. And this creates the broken telephone phenomenon in poor rural communities, and it ends up misleading a lot of people. And lastly, there is religion. Religion on the continent plays a role in polluting the information ecosystem because of what I would call toxic, unquestioning religiosity, where you have religious leaders who are able to rally the flock for a particular candidate or a particular person with a false promise that voting for that person will guarantee blessings in a way that the voters, the citizens are threatened, that if they don't vote for that person, then they are assured of eternal damnation. So all those things, the four items that make this fight very important, made it regrettable and made it easy for this information to spread far and wide the art of political propaganda. Public figures who have created this notion that because something is official, then it must be true, money, digital illiteracy, and religion.

[00:15:03] And lastly, as they come to the end of my chat, I would just want to say what of the interventions would work in the different contexts in which we operate or anyone who's tuned into this course. So the first intervention is what we do at Africa check, and that is fact-checking. Fact-checking is essentially looking at a claim that has been made in public and checking out to find whether the claim is true, whether it's backed up by evidence, whether that evidence is publicly available, and whether the claim is being made within the context. And you have to, in shorthand, sort the facts from the fiction. The other thing that we can do to disrupt the flow of false information or the cycle of misinformation and disinformation during elections is what we call media literacy clinics. So this involves just training, making presentations, and public sessions with people, voters, journalists, civil society, and public officials, so that they understand why they have to make claims that are backed up by evidence. There's also a need to engage the media by the people who are trying to combat false information or the spread of false information in such a way that they amplify the correct information. And whenever they fact-check and they find that the public figure is making misleading claims, then they call out the public figure and ask the public figure to correct that kind of misinformation. These kinds of building allies within the information ecosystem, building communities that work together to combat false information, have been useful in the Kenyan space. And the other thing we have to think about is how to communicate accurate information. So misinformation is usually juicy. It's packaged in a way that lends itself to the emotions in a way that it just flies on digital media, on social media. What we have to think about as people who are keen to this combating false information during elections, we have to think about a way of making accurate information palatable and easy to digest. So fact checks usually are cerebral. And what we have done in Kenya; for example, we partnered under an initiative called Fumbua, which means to debunk or uncover in Swahili. What it meant was that it brought together journalists, podcasters, it brought together content creators and cartoonists. And we packaged fact-check in a way that was very digestible with video, with graphics, in a way that was easy to understand, easy to share, and easy to consume. So that is all I would like to share with you from the experience of covering elections in Kenya, and I

hope some of the ideas that I have shared. You will find them useful. Thank you very much.