The relevance of Fact Checking during Elections

[00:00:18] **Speaker 1** My name is Alphonce Shindu. I am the Kenya editor for Africa. Check. Being working as a journalist and editor for the last 15 years. Tackling different aspects of public policy, politics and the legislature. Now this massive online, massive open online course is good because it allows us to 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 October in Nigeria early next year. So as you wind up the electoral season, then 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 Mali information. 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 means and 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 we when we mention misinformation, when we mentioned disinformation, we mentioned money, information. We all know what we are talking about. 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 scarily senior. The instincts 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 this information and this 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 quit, arrest or defected to a rival party so as to mislead the supporters, to sow apathy, or even to lay groundwork for voter suppression. The last concept for me to define is mine information. And this is when genuine information is shared to cause harm because say A that 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 we naturally that turns out to be false or misleading. Therefore, how does false information itself manifest during elections? The experience of Africa and from the different countries that we operating 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 we fake newspaper front pages which are fabricated with the false stories about political parties, about candidates, about policies, and then they are put out there and see it 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 at deepfakes, when you see public figures saying things they would not ordinarily say. And 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 aged and the kind of content, the video clips the audio is inciting. And this leads to very, very fake content. And then we have doctored photos once we see a photoshopped. We have made up stories on social media, the stuff of conspiracies. We have screenshots of fake social media posts, fabricated text chats. We also have sponsored hashtags, which in this case they are the social media. Companies call these inauthentic, coordinated action where there is a kind of astroturfing to rig the trending topics algorithms on social media, so that when 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, their spokespeople. A lot of it is exaggeration of the achievements or reluctant politicos, string of the opponents and such things. Who are the actors? Who spread misinformation. We have tried to group these actors in to fool us. So we think of them as, say, the freelancers who are hired to create frame or seed online narratives. We sometimes call them keyboard militias, sometimes we call them keyboard warriors. But these are freelancers that are lying to the government, to the opposition, or available to both groups. They're depending on the highest bidder, the highest bidder. So we have this group of people, and then we have scammers and fraudsters who pretend they 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 contact with. Some say they are giving campaign merchandise and they ask you to pay for delivery. And once you paid the money, it's never comes back. And then these they they are those who run fake popularity contest with prizes. And then there are others who must come opinion pollsters. And they conned candidates and political parties off their money, pretending that one or two of them votes. We also have among the actors who spread false information at the public figures, the politicians, the political parties. And these, as we have mentioned before, is a smear on the opponents. They spin their way out of their failures, out of the shortcomings in their public record or exaggerates the achievements. And then lastly, we have the mainstream and community media, which inadvertently, in the speed to break news, they 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. Two claims of bias and that of having taken sides. Sometimes this also happens when rumors are incited during radio calling shows and these cannot be verified, but they get repeated by subsequent callers. So we have to ask, why does all this information spread far and wide during elections? Is it because the ground is fertile for false information? Easy 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 the agenda to voters to make their opponents lose votes. So this pursuit of power, one of the reasons why misinformation spreads and we've seen politicians in the 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. And they put this out. So the art of political propaganda is one of the reasons. It's like we think of propaganda as one of the tool kits that politicians are trying to mainstream across the world to push their agenda. Unfortunately, a lot of the IS 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 scaring 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 with 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 and that is often the case. And the politicians have often, especially the incumbents, have learned to use the power of incumbency to to mislead, to put out strong statistics about the achievements, to put out wrong figures about the achievements. The next motivation for why false information spreads is money. So as report after report in the continent in Kenya has shown, political campaigns pay people, they pay companies, they 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 the similar modus operandi being being deployed to create or to 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 quality information, how to verify disputed information before the show, before they forward as received or before they retreat, 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 point of low numbers is about the connected individuals. And in the continent of Africa, especially in the rural areas, they. A very few people connected to the smartphone. So you find one person who's connected to their smartphone becomes the latest source of news from 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 in the continent plays a role in polluting the information ecosystem because of what I would call the 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 so that the voters, the citizens are threatened, that if they don't vote for that person, then the. Assured of of eternal damnation. So all those things, the four items that make make it very this fight made him sorry that make it easy for this information to spread far and wide the art of political propaganda. The public figures who have created this notion that because something is official, then it must be true. Money. Digital illiteracy. And religion. And lastly, as they come to the end of my chart, I would just want to say what of the interventions that 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 from from the fiction. The other thing that we can do to disrupt the flow of false information or the cycle of misinformation, disinformation during elections is what we call media literacy clinics. So this involves just training, making presentations, public sessions with people, voters, journalists, the civil society, 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 the amplify the correct information. And whenever they. FactCheck And 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 allies, building allies within the information ecosystem, building communities that work together to combat false information, has been useful in the Kenyan, 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 it's it's packaged in a way that lends itself to the emotions in a way that it just flies in or on on digital media, on social media. What we have to think about as people who are keen to do this, combating or false information during elections, we have to think about a way of making false information, accurate information. Sorry, we have to think about a way of making accurate information. Palatable, easy to digest. So fact checks is usually is liberal. And what we have done in Kenya, for example, we partnered under an initiative called we call it More, which is debunk or uncovering Kiswahili and what that meant. It brought together judges, podcasters, it brought together content creators, cartoonists. And we package fox6 in a way that was very digestible with video, with the graphics we had, in a way that it 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.