

The new information paradigm and elections

[00:00:18] **Speaker 1** Welcome to the massive open online course "Information and Elections in the Digital Era." This course is organized by the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas with the support of UNESCO and UNDP. I am very happy that you are here today. My name is Albertina Piterbarg, and I am an electoral expert at UNESCO and the lead trainer of this course. Today we will start with module one. In this first module, we will address the issue of elections and the new information paradigm. We will also analyze how the new digital era, including the Internet, social media, artificial intelligence, learning machine, and big data, affect electoral processes. We will learn about the electoral cycle approach, and we will talk about how and why human rights, freedom of expression, and press freedom are key for democracies and what are the main international standards that apply to these rights. We will finally address the critical importance of the human rights approach to artificial intelligence.

[00:01:23] Let's see artificial intelligence and the new information paradigm. Democracy requires free, periodic, transparent, and inclusive elections. Freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and the right to political participation are also critical to societies ruled by the respect of human rights. In today's digital environment, we have unlimited opportunities for communication between citizens, politicians and political parties, democratic institutions, and electoral management bodies.

[00:01:57] However, with billions of human beings connected and many different interests and agendas involved, there is also a higher possibility for hateful content, disinformation, and misinformation to circulate widely, putting democratic processes and institutions at risk. There are an estimated 4.2 billion eligible voters, and more than 50% of the world's population is connected. That means that, most likely, all these billions of voters are connected too. Social networks are everywhere in our everyday lives. And the impact of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and data can intentionally or unintentionally affect in a negative way and undermine electoral processes all over the world. Voters may be manipulated through strong emotional content, cheated in good faith, and misled about political leaders and institutions.

[00:03:01] But before continuing, what exactly is artificial intelligence? While there is no one universally accepted definition of artificial intelligence, UNESCO's World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology, known as COMEST, describes it as machines capable of imitating certain functionalities of human intelligence, including such features as perception, learning, reasoning, problem-solving, language interaction and even producing creative work. In current artificial intelligence research, it is the aspect of rationality that is considered for a machine to be classified as intelligent.

[00:03:47] Rationality refers to the machine's ability to perceive, collect and interpret data. Machines may have the ability to apply reasoning and decide on how to best react without human intervention. Artificial intelligence and machine learning have the capacity, thanks to algorithms, to perform tasks that before it could only be done by human beings. But what are algorithms? Algorithms are simply a set of rules which specify how to solve a particular problem. Artificial intelligence is capable of gathering so much data thanks to algorithms. Very complex algorithms, of course. And we call this phenomenon big data. The new datasets gathered, thanks to artificial intelligence, so much information, so big that traditional support cannot manage them. With connected devices, smartphones, self-driving cars, and the amount and complexity of data that is all around us, this problem of big data is growing exponentially. And the impact on elections too.

[00:04:58] Artificial intelligence and machine learning can also benefit democratic institutions by engaging voters and helping them be better informed. Artificial intelligence has the potential to empower independent journalism, political campaigning, and electoral processes in general. Algorithms can have a positive impact when used to reduce or remove hateful content by analyzing the online behavior of voters. Targeted voter education campaigns could reach a targeted audience, increasing their impact. Same for conflict prevention or advocating for women's rights to political participation. Everything could be better with artificial intelligence and algorithms working in our favor.

[00:05:44] But artificial intelligence, big data, and machine learning can also be used to the detriment of voters and democratic institutions in general. One of the main problematic aspects of artificial intelligence and elections is that algorithms have the potential to reproduce and reinforce existing biases exacerbating discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping. Artificial intelligence can increase tensions between freedom of expression, the role of journalism, social media, and electoral processes. Platforms may choose to increase traffic to privilege certain algorithms over others. For example, unfortunately, algorithms that prioritize the most controversial exchanges usually have more engagement, which means more traffic. Therefore they made the platforms more attractive for business. The use of algorithms by private companies, it's mostly inaccessible to democratic governments and is unregulated or only partially so. And since algorithms are in the hands of private parties with whom agreements must be reached in order to protect democracy and electoral mechanisms, the dialogue with these companies and third parties is essential for the development of elections and democratic institutions.

[00:07:11] So understanding this dynamic is fundamental for electoral management bodies, practitioners, and everyone who is involved, including governments, because it is important to safeguard the integrity of electoral processes as well as the role of the news and the media all along the electoral cycles. So there are three issues that need to be addressed to safeguard the integrity of democratic elections. One, as we said, it's online disinformation and misinformation. The other one is the digital dimension of the safety of all actors involved. And the third one is that disrupted practices in election campaigning and communications can eventually become a real threat to electoral institutions.

[00:07:59] All these issues are somehow interconnected, and we will cover them in depth in the following modules. But as you can see in this graphic, journalism is under fire, information is under attack, and electoral integrity is at risk. All these elements are interconnected, and we cannot say that if we are attacking one part of the equation, the equation will be okay. We need to tackle everything and find the right solutions and feasible responses to strengthen the democratic process in this context.

[00:08:40] But to better understand how to integrate solutions, it is important that we address the methodological model of how to approach elections in general. Elections are extremely complex processes involving thousands and even millions of voters. There are different electoral systems, but the periodicity of democratic elections always follows the same path. At each new electoral process and they look like, let's say, the seasons of the year— one follows the other. Electoral components of stakeholders do not stand alone; they are all interdependent, and therefore the breakdown of one aspect also impacts the other one. The electoral cycle is basically organized into three periods that follow each other. A pre-electoral one that includes all the planning, the budgeting, the preparation for the logistics, civic and voter education, and the voter registration process, among others. This phase is followed by the electoral period, which entails the nomination of candidates,

political campaign, voter education, polling day, voting and tabulation, counting and calculation, and the announcement of results. The post-electoral period also sometimes called the inter-electoral period, includes audits and evaluations, revisions of the electoral legal framework, rules and regulations, institutional strengthening, and capacity building. There are very critical cross-cutting issues that go through the whole three periods of the electoral cycle. For instance, women's participation at all stages of the cycle, as well as the inclusion of vulnerable groups or the security of all actors involved. The cyclical approach is a key instrument to facilitate the understanding of the interdependence of the different electoral activities. It helps electoral management bodies, electoral officials, and practitioners to think and plan ahead rather than reacting to each electoral event as it happens. We will take a look at the topic of human rights and elections in the digital era after a short break. See you in five.

[00:11:00] Welcome back. So, we were talking about how the new information paradigm affects elections. But, of course, it does not only affect the electoral process of democratic institutions. This new paradigm has a deep impact on every aspect of our lives and sometimes also on our rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes that everyone has the right to take part in the government of their country directly or through freely chosen representatives. International normative frameworks also highlight the principle of no discrimination and equal rights for everyone, no matter the sex, gender, religion, the origin of nationality, etc. International human rights instruments protect interrelated rights crucial for transparent and democratic electoral processes. For instance, the right to participate in elections implies other rights, like the right to freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of association, the right to peaceful assembly, and the right to privacy. And most importantly, according to international standards, all of the rights that individuals enjoy offline also apply online. These rights and principles are protected by the Charter of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The most relevant rights pertaining to electoral processes are enshrined in Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

[00:12:45] The obligation of the state to respect and protect freedom of expression is a core component of free and fair elections. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has a right to freedom of opinion and expression. This right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media, regardless of frontiers. The right to access information is also very important to the role of the media in democracies, as the public need to be very well-informed to make decisions. Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that no one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with their privacy, family, home, or correspondence, nor attacks upon their own reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference and attacks. But as we have already mentioned, the new information paradigm might challenge the right to privacy by transforming our personal information into a commodity.

[00:13:54] So let's take a closer look at these challenges. Harassment, "trolling," campaigns, and intimidation have polluted parts of the Internet and posed very real offline threats. All forms of hate speech, like threats, insults, intimidation, and cyber-bullying online, can lead to real war targeting, harassment, violence, and murder, even to alleged genocide and ethnic cleansing. On the other hand, overreaction by regulators, under the excuse of fighting hate and extremism, is also becoming a critical human rights issue. Many countries are limiting what people can access online, restricting access to information, free speech, and political activity. Internet shutdowns seem to have become a

tool to stifle legitimate debate, dissent, and protests. Many frameworks and guidelines exist, but they are implemented unevenly, and none of them are truly global. However, Artificial Intelligence is global, so we need a global instrument to regulate it. On November 2021, the recommendations of the ethics of Artificial Intelligence were adopted by UNESCO's general conference and its 41st session by all Member States. This is the first global standards-setting instrument on the ethics of Artificial Intelligence resulting from an extended multi-stakeholder consultation to agree on a concrete policy and action set for recommendations. It states that we need a human center artificial intelligence useful for the greater interest of the people, not the other way around.

[00:15:47] The five objectives of the recommendations were: first, to provide a universal framework for values, principles, and actions to guide states in formulating the legislations, policies, and other instruments regarding artificial intelligence. Consistent always with international law, of course. The second objective was to guide the action of individuals, groups, communities, institutions, and private sector companies to ensure the embedding of ethics in all stages of the artificial intelligence system lifecycle. The thirds objective is to protect, promote and respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, human dignity, and equality, including gender equality. To safeguard the interests of present and future generations, to preserve the environment, biodiversity, and ecosystems, and to respect cultural diversity in all stages of the artificial intelligence systems lifecycle. The fourth objective would be to foster multistakeholder, multi-disciplinary, and pluralistic dialogue and consensus building about ethical issues. And the last one is to promote equitable access to development and knowledge in the field of artificial intelligence. So, we need artificial intelligence committed to respecting and promoting universal rights, including democratic institutions and electoral processes. Artificial intelligence is already in our lives, directing our choices, often in ways that can be harmful. There are some legislative backrooms around the industry that need to be filled fast. The first step is to agree on exactly which values need to be enshrined and which rules need to be enforced.

[00:17:34] Let's do a brief recap of what we have seen together today in module one. During this module, we learn about how the new digital era affects electoral processes and what artificial intelligence, algorithms, and big data are. We are examining the electoral cycle approach. We saw it as a key methodological tool ideal to address problems for effective electoral-related solutions, particularly to the challenges presented by this new digital era. We talk about how and why human rights, freedom of expression, and freedom are key for democracies and which are the main related international standards. And finally, we addressed the recommendation and the ethics of artificial intelligence adopted by UNESCO's General Conference in 2021.

[00:18:23] Next week in module two, we will address why we should use the term fake news. We will learn the definitions of misinformation and malinformation—the different key elements of these dynamics. We will take a look at the human drivers behind misleading content, hate speech, and its impact on electoral processes. We will also see the importance of preventing electoral-related violence and gender-based violence, and violence against journalists during an election. Thank you very much. See you next week, Bye.