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GENERATIVE AI AND ITS INFLUENCE ON SOUTH AFRICA'S 2024 ELECTIONS

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ANALYSIS

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Executive Summary

This paper explores the role of *Generative AI* (GenAI) in South Africa's 2024 General Election, focusing on evidence-based findings regarding the spread and influence of AI-generated disinformation. Using a framework of proxy indicators – including the proliferation of AI-generated disinformation, foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), and shifts in public trust in government and media – the study provides a clear analysis of GenAI's measurable impact on the election.

Findings show a limited presence of AI-driven disinformation, with most misinformation originating from traditional sources rather than AI-powered platforms. Public trust in media remained relatively resilient, and there was no notable decline linked to GenAI-generated content, aside from isolated cases involving deepfake images and impersonations. These insights challenge assumptions that AI would significantly disrupt the election, instead revealing the robustness of South Africa's existing media and social structures.

This paper concludes with targeted policy recommendations aimed at strengthening South Africa's electoral resilience, helping to harness GenAI's benefits while addressing potential risks in the lead-up to the 2026 election.

1. Introduction

GenAI has taken the world by storm. From manufacturing to healthcare and finance, GenAI technologies are at the forefront of driving technological innovation across numerous industries. For individual internet users, user-friendly GenAI-powered applications like DALL-E, ChatGPT, Gemini, and Midjourney have revolutionised content creation. The production of hyper-realistic *Artificial Intelligence Generated Content* (AIGC) in audio, video, image and other formats is now possible at the simple writing of a prompt and a click of the send button.

GenAI has captivated the global community, sparking discussions about how to best harness its benefits while minimising its potential harms. The question, 'GenAI: A blessing or a curse?' (*Loth, Kappes & Pahl, 2024*), remains central in ongoing global discourse in what has become a disruptive moment at the intersection of technology and human rights.

In the realm of politics, much of the potential harms of GenAI have been on its potential to facilitate highly targeted, large-scale disinformation campaigns with AIGC increasingly difficult to discern as authentic. This anxiety intensified as the 2024 ‚super election year' approached, with sixty-four countries and two billion voters said to be vulnerable to "unprecedented disinformation" (*de Groot, 2024*) in "AI's first election" (*Gordon, 2024*). The fear was that disinformation crafters would exploit easily accessible and affordable GenAI-powered platforms to produce AIGC that convincingly mimics human-created audio, images, and videos - deepfakes (*Capraro et al., 2024*).

Opinions on the magnitude of the threat were varied. Some academics described the concerns about "supercharged" disinformation as "overblown," arguing that existing social and informational structures were sufficiently resilient to mitigate the widespread influence of AI-generated misinformation (*Simon, Altay & Mercier*). On the other hand, civil society organisations like Freedom House (2023) indicated that AI-based tools were being used in at least 16 countries to manipulate information on political and social issues. "Purveyors of disinformation are employing AI-generated images, audio, and text, making the truth easier to distort and harder to discern," the international human rights watchdog raised the alarm. Much of the discourse, perhaps unintentionally, had the effect of generalising the perceived threats of AI-generated misinformation, claiming that these effects apply uniformly to all countries facing elections in 2024.

At the time this paper was written, several significant elections had taken place in Bangladesh, Taiwan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Senegal, India, and South Africa. Therefore, it is now possible to conduct an evidence- and data-based assessment of how GenAI, and AI in general, has affected elections thus far.

This paper examines South Africa's 2024 General Election as a case study to measure how if at all, GenAI-generated misinformation influenced the lead-up to the country's election and its outcome. To achieve this, this study utilised a framework of proxy variables on the proliferation of AI-generated disinformation, *foreign information manipulation and interference* (FIMI), and changes in trust in government and media in South Africa.

As an additional goal, this paper seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of GenAI's impact on elections in diverse global contexts. By challenging overgeneralised assumptions about GenAI's effects on democratic processes, the authors aim to highlight the need for a more nuanced and context-based approach to measuring digital threats to democracy.

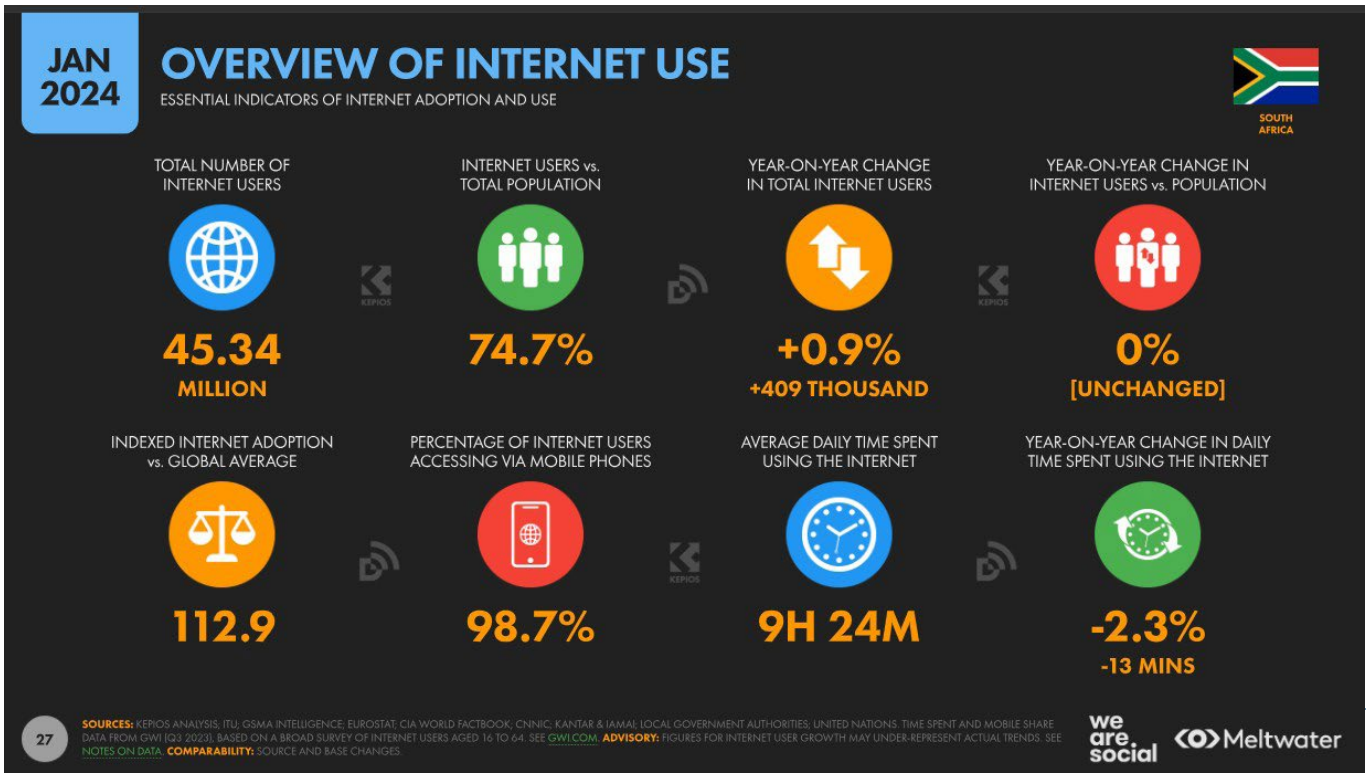
The paper also presents a set of policy and legislative recommendations aimed at fostering a resilient electoral ecosystem that leverages the benefits of AI while mitigating its potential risks to South Africa's democracy. With the next election scheduled for mid-2026, it is imperative that the country is fully prepared to ensure that the elections remain free and fair.

GenAI technology is constantly evolving, and its impact on elections will undoubtedly increase. Therefore, this study presents a „snapshot in time" rather than a definitive treatise on GenAI's impact on elections. It serves as a critical step toward understanding and addressing contemporary electoral challenges the technology poses.

2. South Africa's Internet and Social Media Landscape

In January 2024, with a population of approximately sixty million, South Africa had an internet penetration rate of 74.7% and 45.34 million internet users, of whom 26 million use social media, representing 42.8% of the population (*DataReportal, 2024*). With the global internet penetration rate at 66.2%, South Africa's rate is above the global average (*DataReportal, 2024*).

Fig. 1 | Overview of internet use

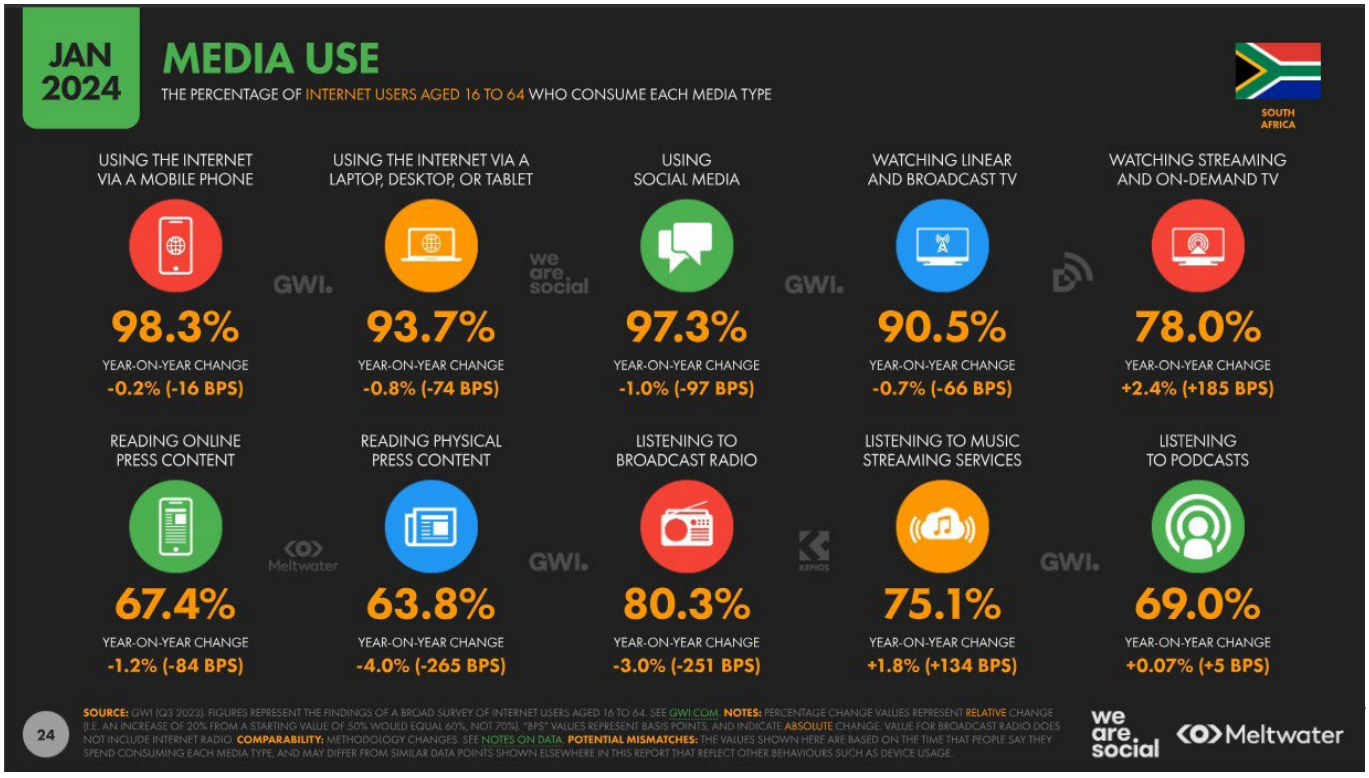


While these figures may present a glowing picture of South Africa's use of technology, a glaring digital divide exists within the country. South Africa's relatively high penetration rate masks high levels of intersectional digital inequality affecting people in rural areas, women, the elderly, or those with low education or income levels (*Partridge, 2024*). Within the context of the spread of disinformation, South Africa's digital inequality, compounded by high levels of socio-economic inequality, poverty, and unemployment, along with the enduring legacy of Apartheid, profoundly shapes the country's information landscape. Economic hardships and limited access to reliable information create a population particularly vulnerable to manipulation. Disinformation campaigns often exploit these vulnerabilities, exacerbating historical divisions and tensions among different racial, geographic, and socio-

economic groups.

The popularity of various social media platforms is as follows (*DataReportal, 2024*). It must be noted that Twitter is the central platform for political contestation in South Africa. Although its user base may appear smaller than the others, it is where politicians, journalists, commentators, and opinion makers gather (*Van Damme et al., 2021*), significantly influencing the country's political discourse on and offline.

Fig. 2 | Media use



3. The impact of GenAI disinformation on South Africa

Few examples were identified of GenAI being used in South Africa's 2024 elections. Given this, it does not appear that GenAI disinformation had a significant impact on South Africa's 2024 elections. This assessment is supported by AfricaCheck, a South-Africa based fact-checking organisation, which found that: "Apart from some isolated cases of impersonations and generated images, there was far less AI-powered false information than anticipated, particularly in the form of coordinated campaigns."

While few in number, several GenAI examples were identified, which were categorised based on the following framework:

Tab. 1 | Threat category

0	No direct political relevance
1	Targeting information consumption
2	Targeting citizens' ability to vote
3	Targeting candidates and political parties
4	Targeting trust in democracy
5	Targeting election-related infrastructure

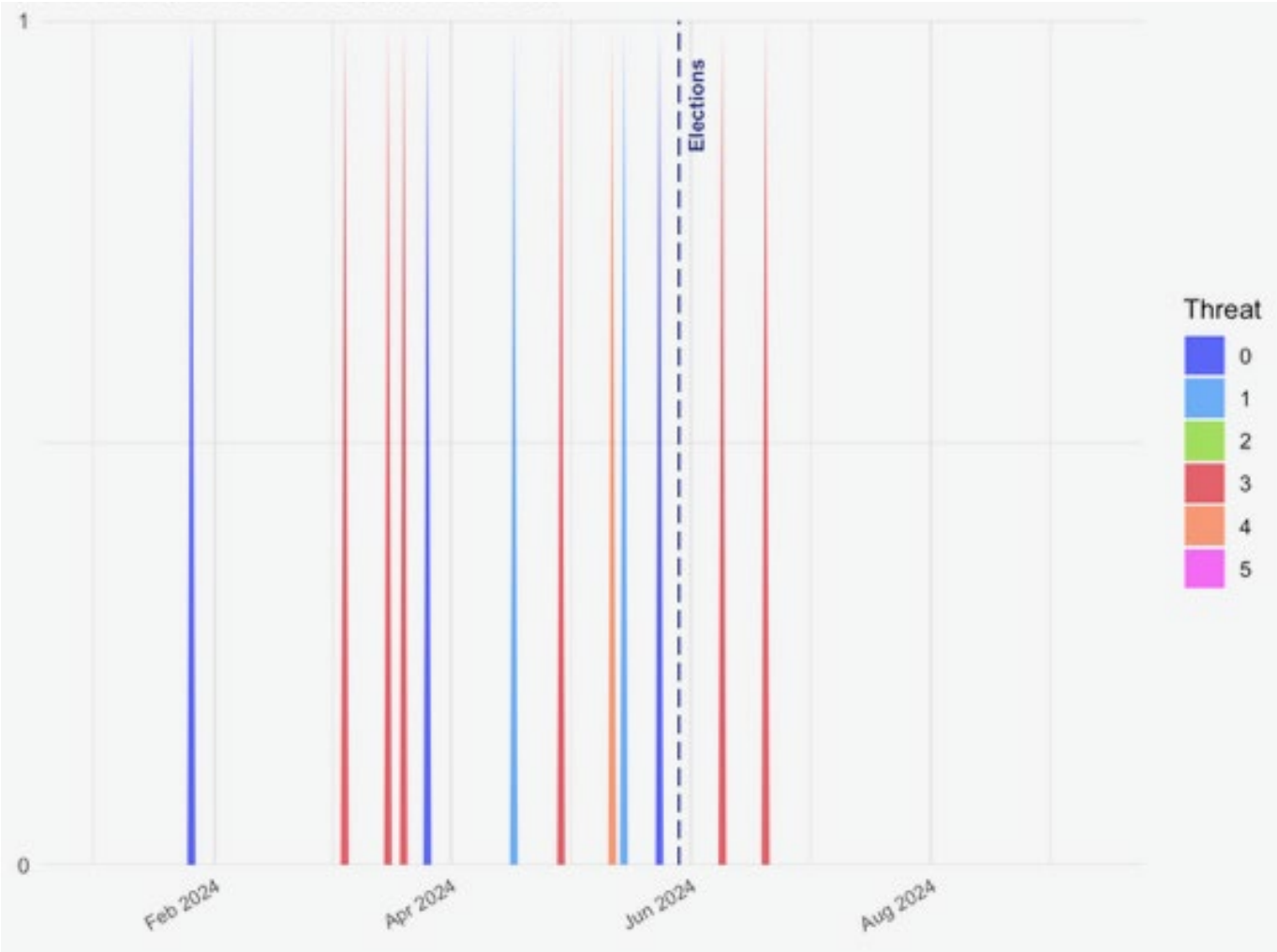
Identified examples included:

Tab. 2 | Threat incident description

0	AI reimagines Ramaphosa as Kaizer Chiefs Player	2024/01/26	*Online news*
3	Eminem video endorsing South African opposition party EFF and bashing the ruling ANC is a deepfake	2024/03/05	*X, TikTok*
3	Opinion by Marius Roodt; Questioning whether MK party manifesto was written with the usage of generative AI	2024/03/16	*News media*
3	Deepfake of Joe Biden allegedly threatening to sanction South Africa if the ANC wins 2024 elections	2024/04/29	*Facebook, X, WhatsApp*
1	Misleading AI image showing endless potholes pock-marking a road, with Cape Town's Table Mountain looming in the background	2024/05/15	*Instagram, Facebook, X*
0	Mpho Dagada's book 'I am the Vision'; last chapter incorporates answers written with ChatGPT 4	2024/05/24	*Online news*
3	Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla posted a fake video featuring a Donald Trump endorsement	2024/03/20	*X, TikTok*
3	Party Leader enters president's office in AI illustration	2024/06/09	*X*
1	Referendum Party posted a pair of generative images, "In 2024, you will be voting for one of two possible futures," the post stated	2024/04/17	*X*
0	One organisation that has used AI for this purpose, is Rivonia Circle. Rivonia Circle have developed Thoko the Bot.	2024/03/26	*News media*

These incidents were spread out across 2024 in the run up to the elections, with a few occurring post-election:

Fig. 3 | AI-Incidents in South Africa



While the overall observed cases were few, one might also argue that high awareness of GenAI disinformation fostered societal resilience. The awareness and ineffective attempts to use GenAI disinformation likely made it an unappealing strategy for disinformation purveyors. Additionally, South Africa's high levels of internet freedom and a robust, free media landscape could have likely helped counteract the effects of GenAI disinformation. The following section illustrates South Africa's resilience factors against disinformation.

4. The Dynamics of Disinformation in South Africa

To establish a framework for contextual analysis, it is essential to outline the evolution and characteristics of disinformation, misinformation, and FIMI in South Africa. The country's disinformation landscape is often inaccurately assessed using models developed in Western contexts. These frameworks may fail to account for South Africa's distinctive social, political, and historical factors, leading to an incomplete understanding of the dynamics at play.

To address this gap, this paper employs Kuo and Marwick's (2021) framework of Critical Disinformation Studies. This approach emphasises the importance of analysing disinformation through the lenses of history, culture, and politics, offering a more nuanced and contextually relevant understanding of how disinformation manifests and operates within South Africa.

4.1 The Unique Socio-Cultural Dynamics of South African Information Sharing As a Disinformation Risk

An empirical study by Morales-Madrid et al. (2021) across six Sub-Saharan countries, including South Africa, highlights that the principles of solidarity, interconnectedness, and interdependence have historically shaped interactions within Sub-Saharan African communities. These cultural values are also reflected in how people engage with misinformation on digital platforms. In these countries, Morales-Madrid and his co-authors found that the sharing of health-related "(mis)information" – along with news about terrorism, political violence, and scams – was primarily driven by a sense of civic duty. Digital media acts as a social utility, where the desire to warn others often leads to the unintentional spread of misinformation.

This is a sentiment echoed
by Mare, Mabweazara and Moyo (2019):

> *…not everyone shares fake news with the intention to cause harm. In some cases, the sharing of fake news is influenced by ignorance and the sheer desire to inform friends, relatives and family members. Because of limited access to verified information, especially in rural and peri-urban areas, citizens are likely to share fake news without having the luxury to cross-check and verify its authenticity.*

This sense of a "civic duty" and a genuine desire to inform others is facilitated by a dynamic of South Africa's digital ecosystem that may not mirror other countries. Ninety-six per cent of South Africans use WhatsApp as their preferred mode of communication, the second-highest adoption rate globally (*Labuschagne, 2024*). In rural areas and villages with traditionally lower internet penetration rates, WhatsApp serves as more than just a messaging platform. It serves as a valuable tool for individuals and families to overcome barriers and access important information (*Venturino & Hsu, 2022*). Its cost-effectiveness and simplicity have made it a popular tool for information sharing among both literate and non-literate users, effectively bypassing traditional literacy barriers (*Gondwe, 2023*).

This reveals a platform with great potential to serve as a powerful conduit for AI-generated digital media disinformation and misinformation, given WhatsApp's near-universal user, user-friendly interface and affordability in the country. WhatsApp has great potential to facilitate the rapid sharing of AIGC, including manipulated images, videos and audio, beyond the content moderation guardrails of other social media platforms, fact-checking and social media analytics.

Another crucial factor influencing the spread and believability of disinformation in South Africa is the way it is crafted and tailored to resonate with local beliefs and contexts.

The crafters of disinformation content targeted to South African audiences often employ a „highly exaggerated emotional tone" to exploit audiences' cognitive biases to increase its believability and provoke anger (*Gagiano & Marivate, 2023*). As an example, numerous studies have highlighted how social media portrayals of primarily black foreign nationals as criminals responsible for poverty, crime, and unemployment in South Africa have converted virtual hostility into offline violence (*Fokou et al., 2022*). So powerful is xenophobic misinformation in motivating offline behaviour that political parties that promote these narratives reap the rewards at the ballot box (*Human Rights Watch, 2024*).

This is undoubtedly also acerbated by the low trust in the government and dissatisfaction with its performance. In a survey, Afrobarometer (2024) found more than eight in 10 South Africans (83%) said the country is heading in "the wrong direction," a 37-percentage-point increase compared to 2011 (46%). "Over the past decade, South Africans have become steadily more pessimistic in their assessments of the country's overall orientation."

4.2 South Africa's Resilience Actor Against Disinformation

Despite grave risks, South Africa has several factors that contribute to its resilience against information disorders. According to Freedom House's 2023 Freedom on the Net report, the country is rated as „free" consistently earning high scores over the years. Despite challenges in internet access, the government does not control the country's internet infrastructure, censor content or impose connectivity restrictions. Furthermore, the government rarely forces publishers or digital platforms to remove legitimate content. Instead, the self-regulatory *Internet Service Providers Association* (ISPA) makes takedown decisions.

Another resilience factor is a digital ecosystem that fosters open dialogue and civic engagement with safeguards against digital authoritarianism and repression. South Africa's right to freedom of expression and media independence is deeply rooted in its constitutional framework. The country's independent judiciary plays a crucial role in enforcing these rights, allowing South Africans to engage in open discussions on various topics without fear of digital repression from the state. This contributes to a vibrant social media landscape, offering space and tolerance to a wide range of viewpoints and perspectives.

South Africa's media landscape is equally vibrant and independent (*Govenden, 2024*). Journalists and media houses fearlessly report on government failures, serving as an effective and powerful "fourth estate." This has positioned the media as a trusted source of information and central in public debates, particularly on social media. Between 2019 and 2022, trust in news media in South Africa grew from 49% to 61% (*Roper, 2022*), with a drop to 57% in 2024 (*Roper, 2024*) but remaining well above the global average of 40% (*Newman, 2024*). Trust in the media creates a dynamic that the media remains a trusted source of information. As highlighted by Findlay (*2023*):

> *Despite its challenges, South Africa maintains a free, independent media that creates its own community separate from any partisan group — a seeming rarity in the world these days… A healthy political environment relies on tough debates grounded in shared facts facilitated by a central, independent media.*

As South Africa headed to the 2024 election, similar to the global community, there was much concern about the looming threat of AIGC disinformation. Interestingly, Ipsos' Global Views on AI and Disinformation: Perception of Disinformation Risks in the Age of Generative AI (*2023*) survey found that South Africans surveyed presented high awareness of the possibility of using AI to generate realistic disinformation and misinformation in all instances higher than the global average, revealing a strong resilience factor.

The survey revealed the following percentages of affirmative responses to questions about GenAI disinformation. The global average is included for comparative purposes.

Tab. 3 | Ipsos' Global Views on AI and Disinformation

SURVEY QUESTION	SOUTH AFRICA (PERCENTAGE "YES")	GLOBAL AVERAGE (PERCENTAGE "YES")
Do you think there is more, less or about the same amount of lying and misuse of facts in politics and media in (country) than there was 30 years ago?	73%	53%
To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statements? I am confident that the average person in (country) can tell real news from ‚fake news.'	49%	44%
To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statements? I am confident that I can tell real news from ‚fake news' (entirely made-up stories or facts).	75%	66%
To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Artificial intelligence is making it easier to generate very realistic fake news stories and images % Agree / Disagree	77%	74%
To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Artificial intelligence will make misinformation and disinformation worse.	52%	51%

4.3 The South African Conception of FIMI: A Domestic-First Focus

In South Africa, the concept of FIMI is nuanced by a distinct focus on domestic interference, which we emphasise by referring to it as (F)IMI.

The addition of parentheses around the "F" underscores the fact that a domestic-first lens is essential to capture the nature of interference in the country accurately. Unlike traditional understandings of FIMI that emphasise external actors as the primary instigators of manipulation, the South African approach acknowledges that much of the interference originates within the nation's own borders.

This perspective highlights the pivotal role of domestic actors in creating, sustaining, or even normalising the infrastructure that enables manipulation and influence. Foreign entities often exploit these pre-existing domestic channels or co-opt local narratives to achieve their goals. In essence, foreign interests tend to piggyback on well-established domestic systems and networks, leveraging them to amplify their influence rather than creating entirely new structures of manipulation. This dynamic relationship challenges conventional approaches that dichotomise foreign and domestic influences, instead presenting them as intertwined forces within the country's political and social landscape.

Focusing on (F)IMI allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the various dimensions of influence and manipulation in South Africa. It emphasises that the infrastructure used to manipulate public opinion, political dynamics, or economic decisions often emerges from local conditions, which may then be opportunistically exploited or augmented by external actors. Thus, a domestic-first approach reframes the discourse, drawing attention to the foundational importance of local actors and infrastructure in shaping both the nature and impact of foreign interference.

By prioritising a domestic perspective, the concept of (F)IMI better captures the unique characteristics of interference in South Africa. It accounts for the complex, intertwined roles of both domestic and foreign players and reflects the intricate power dynamics at play. This framing not only helps in dissecting current forms of interference but also provides a more grounded basis for devising strategies to mitigate its impact.

5. Threats to Democracy in South Africa's 2024 National Elections

5.1 The State of Disinformation and (F)IMI ahead of the 2024 Election

While AI generated disinformation did not play the significant role many presumed, disinformation as a general phenomenon was used to influence voters. Several factions *dominated* the South African political landscape on X – the main platform for political discourse in South Africa – ahead of, during, and after the 2024 National Elections. Some of these groups have a history of using inauthentic influence techniques to drive their narratives.

Key voices included:

The *pro-EFF* community had an outsized presence on X, given its actual results in the elections. It benefits from the paid influencer industry (*Daily Maverick, May 26, Aug 14, Sep 10*), which emerged organically from this community where young, tech-savvy South Africans used their skills to support the EFF. Subsequently, these users have gone on to sell their influence services to the highest bidder (including during the election period), but many still use their skills to support the EFF for ideological reasons. The EFF likely benefited greatly from their pro bono work during the elections.

The *pro-Cyril Ramaphosa faction of the ANC* was greatly supported by a pseudo-anonymous influencer, @goolammv, who was one of, if not the most, influential users during the elections.

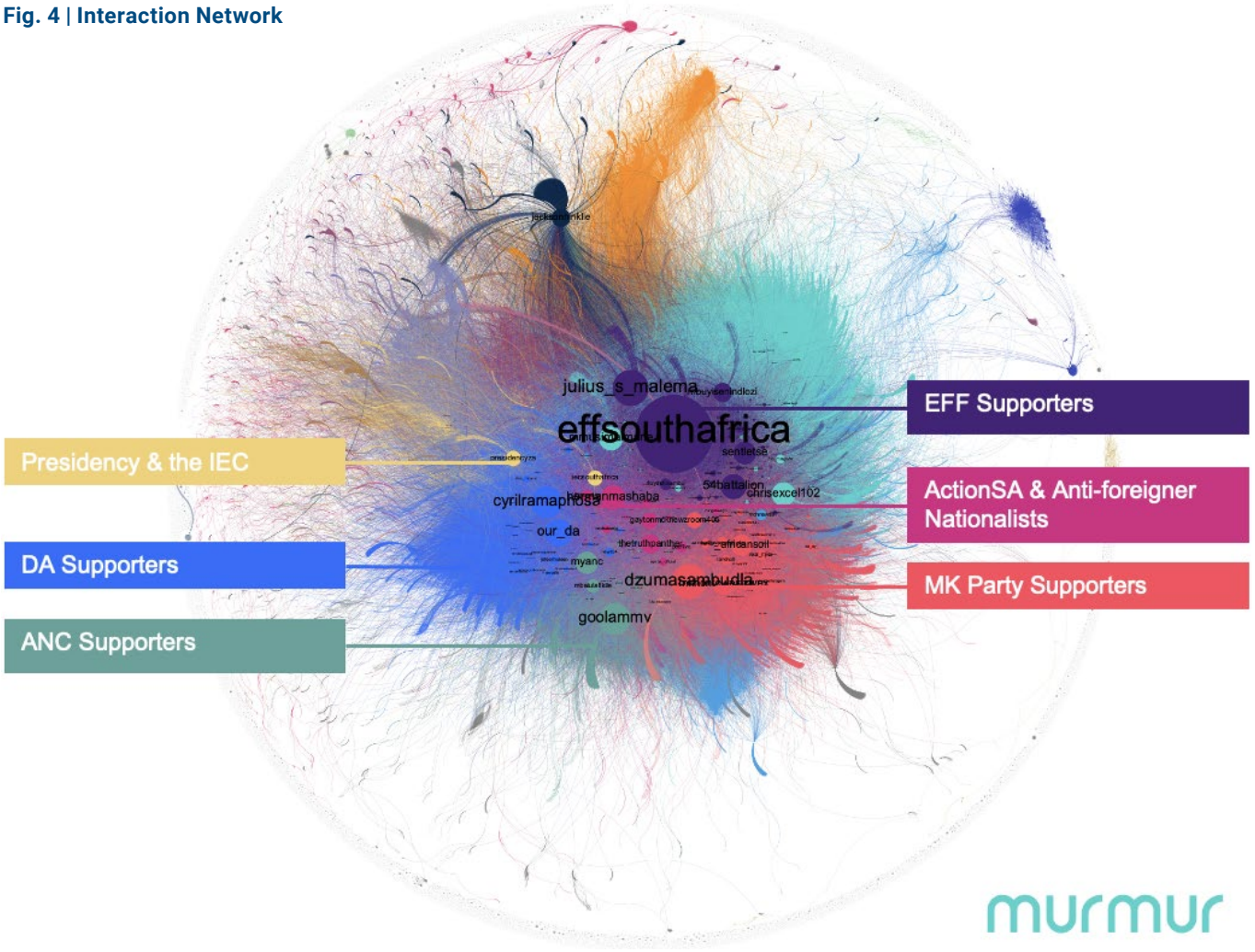
The *pro-DA community* includes most of the White body politic as well as a diverse spectrum of South Africans, including traditional liberals, centrists, moderates, libertarians, and conservatives. This group does not have a known history of using inauthentic influence techniques on social media.

The pro-MK Party community emerged seemingly overnight through the wholesale conversion of the long-standing *Radical Economic Transformation* (RET) community (*CABC, 2024*). This community has a history of leveraging inauthentic influence techniques going as far back as the 2016 "Guptabot" scandal involving MK Party leader Jacob Zuma, the Gupta Brothers, and British PR firm Bell-Pottinger (*Bond, 2017*).

Some of its key anonymous influencers on X, such as @_AfricanSoil, have been accused (although charges were withdrawn) of inciting violence during the 2021 July Unrest (*Daily Maverick, 2021*), wherein over 300 people lost their lives. That account now primarily focuses on pro-Russia content that aligns closely with the Russian Perspective Network (see below). In addition, one of the MK Party's key leaders, Jacob Zuma's daughter, Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla, allegedly collaborated with Russia on a global campaign at the time of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (*Sguazzin & Patel, 2023*). These examples underscore this community's proximity to Russia and the likely adoption of their inauthentic influence techniques.

Finally, there was the *anti-foreigner nationalist community* which is the home to the anti-foreigner, anti-state nationalist movement, #PutSouthAfricans First/Operation Dudula. This community is primarily anchored by *fairly* new political entrants, ActionSA, the *African Transformation Movement* (ATM) and the Patriotic Alliance. All three parties leverage anti-foreigner sentiment to bootstrap their parties' prominence and relevance. The community was created on 27 April 2020 (*amaBhungane, 2022*), one month into South Africa's Covid-19 lockdown. Aside from the aforementioned political party accounts, it is anchored by large anonymous accounts, @TheTruthPanther and @PSAFLive (*#PutSouthAfricans Live*), and bears all the hallmarks of an influence operation.

Fig. 4 | Interaction Network



CAPTION: An interaction network highlighting the main communities discussing the South African 2024 National Elections on X. Users are connected together when they interact with each other by reposting or @mentioning each other. A community detection algorithm is used to highlight distinct communities of users in different colours. User influence is denoted by node size. Date range: 29 April - 4 June 2024.

5.2. Analysis of F(IMI) during the 2024 Elections

Influence Operations and Geopolitical Dynamics in South Africa's 2024 National Elections

South Africa's 2024 national elections were not devoid of influence operations, but direct evidence of widespread, acute FIMI remained limited. This relative absence of overt FIMI can be attributed to the distinctive dynamics of the geopolitical influence economy in South Africa, which diverges significantly from that of Western nations.

Unlike in Western contexts, where external actors such as Russia, China, and Iran are often portrayed as malign influences or "the bad guys," South Africa's geopolitical narrative is shaped by historical ties and longstanding sympathies for these countries. These relationships were notably forged during the struggle against Apartheid when these countries provided critical support to the ANC in the form of resources, training, and asylum. This historical solidarity, coupled with the fact that these countries do not bear the same colonial legacy in Africa as Western nations, has created a distinct political and social landscape.

Consequently, external actors such as Russia do not need to rely solely on covert influence operations to establish their presence or exert their influence in South Africa. Given the historical alliances and established sympathies within key political entities, such as the ANC and the MK Party, these actors can engage more openly and formally through diplomatic and political channels, similar to how influence is exercised by other nations globally. Thus, these formal approaches are as essential as the more clandestine, disruptive tactics that characterise influence operations in Western democracies—tactics that, to some extent, also remain present in South Africa.

During the 2024 elections, two strains of influence were particularly notable:

5.2.1 The MK Party's "Big Lie" Campaign

The MK Party deployed a coordinated narrative strategy, reminiscent of the so-called "Big Lie" approach used in countries such as Brazil, Hungary and the United States, amongst others, to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the election results.

This strategy involved disinformation campaigns designed to undermine public trust in the electoral process, challenge the validity of outcomes, and create a narrative of electoral manipulation. By doing so, the MK Party sought to shape the post-election political discourse and legitimise resistance to the official results.

Their campaign started on Sunday, 26th May 2024, when members stormed South Africa's *Independent Electoral Commission* (IEC) storage facilities and started posting photos and videos of blank ballot boxes on social media, creating a trend in the process. Their allusion was that these votes were being stolen despite any evidence of that nature. As we saw in the USA, Brazil and Hungary, cynical political actors were willing to pre-emptively undermine election results to suit their own political agendas. This Big Lie campaign seems like a likely example of FIMI, but there is no clear evidence of this beyond the overt pro-Russia stance of many local accounts in the MK Party community on X, including their use of Russian iconography and terminology in their profile images and usernames.

Luckily, researchers were able to 'pre-bunk' the Big Lie during the seeding phase (*Daily Maverick, 2024*). In addition, commentators credit the MK Party's lack of conviction in continuing to push the Big Lie due to the party's surprisingly strong showing in the elections, giving them the kind of formal position in South Africa's body politic that they were not expecting to receive and which they are subsequently unwilling to give up. Despite this, the party is waging an ongoing legal battle around the results.

Given the MK Party's strong affinity for Russia it appears likely that the Big Lie campaign would have benefitted from Russian training, know-how, and/or resources. However, there is only circumstantial evidence of this.

5.2.2 The Commodification of Influence and the Role of Domestic Actors

Although not unique to South Africa, a distinctive feature of its influence landscape is the "commodification of influence," where domestic actors offer influence services to local brands, celebrities, and political parties, as well as to foreign geopolitical players. This transactional dynamic allows domestic actors to leverage external alliances to achieve their domestic political objectives while aligning with broader geopolitical interests (and vice versa). This approach not only reflects the interconnectedness of domestic and global politics but also illustrates how influence is increasingly becoming a tradable commodity within South Africa's political sphere.

These dynamics demonstrate that the conception of influence in South Africa is deeply shaped by the country's historical relationships and unique political context. Rather than relying exclusively on covert or disruptive tactics, foreign actors are able to operate within formal channels and capitalise on existing affinities, thus rendering their influence both more subtle and more embedded in South Africa's political fabric. As such, understanding South Africa's geopolitical landscape requires a nuanced view that acknowledges these historical and contemporary intersections.

South Africa's 2024 national elections were not immune to influence operations however, direct evidence of acute, mass FIMI was slim.

5.3 The Five Dimensions of Attack

Attacks can fall into a variety of categories, including:

1. Targeting information consumption
2. Targeting citizens' ability to vote
3. Targeting election-related infrastructure
4. Targeting candidates and political parties
5. Targeting trust in democracy

5.3.1 Targeting Information Consumption

This dimension relates to citizens' ability to gain high-quality information to inform their political and social stances and decisions. A pattern seen all over the world is the undermining of trust in news media as it becomes more partisan, catering to specific ideological audiences or echo chambers at the expense of others (*Daily Maverick, 2023*).

This phenomenon is evident in South Africa's media ownership patterns. It is worth noting however, that South Africa has one of the more resilient media landscapes compared to other African and BRICS countries. However, it is also experiencing gradual erosion due to economic and political pressures.

Examples of this erosion include the increasingly jingoistic content published by media house Independent Media, which is ~30% Chinese-owned and closely aligned with rent-seeking factions of the ANC that justify their actions in terms of Black Consciousness-informed beliefs. Independent Media is one of South Africa's most prominent media houses, owning several major national and regional digital media and newspapers, including The Sunday Independent, Cape Times, The Star, Pretoria News, and Cape Argus.

The Independent Media platforms have increasingly been used to conduct personal attacks on the perceived enemies of its owner and in favour of its political allegiances, eschewing the veneer of journalistic principles in the process. Coupled with a few high-profile journalistic gaffs – such as the non-existent Tembisa Decuplets (*BBC News, 2021*) - it is clear that Independent Media, an organisation with arguably the widest reach in the country, has played a large role in undermining trust in the news.

In addition to its Chinese part-ownership, it is alleged that Independent Media helped 'incubate' a news platform, The Insight Factor, which is staunchly pro-Russia and also works to create partisan echo chambers through its content.

The influence of China in Independent Media is not coincidental. Beijing has become a significant force in Africa's media landscape, and it has focused on direct investments in African media and sponsorship of training and exchange programmes for African journalists and students (*Nantulya, 2024*). Xinhua, China's largest media agency, operates 37 bureaus across Africa, vastly outnumbering any other news agency. Another key player, StarTimes, is China's largest digital TV provider in Africa and ranks second only to South Africa's DSTV. In 2024, StarTimes has been expanding its reach by installing satellite dishes in 10,000 rural homes across 20 African countries (*Nantulya, 2024*).

However, despite these efforts, Chinese media consumption remains low in African nations like Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, according to a study conducted between 2017 and 2021 by Herman Wasserman and Dani Madrid-Morales (*Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2022*). These figures are unlikely to have changed. The study found that viewers in these countries tend to favour local TV stations or major international channels like Sky, BBC, and CNN. Similarly, local radio stations are the most popular, with international channels such as BBC, VOA, and RFI preferred over *China Radio International* (CRI). In print, domestic publications and Western newspapers like The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, The Guardian, and The Financial Times are favoured over China Daily, which ranks low among readers. This reflects a trend of limited awareness and engagement with Chinese media across the continent.

Other major media houses, such as Primedia, Media24, and eNCA News, also have their own ownership concerns. Media24's parent company is Naspers, which was originally a pro-government organisation during the Apartheid era. eNCA owners have been criticised for their overly neoliberal stance and harsh editorial dictates on issues.

The net result of this increasingly fractious tenor is less trust in South Africa's media's ability to provide unbiased information. Geopolitical actors have a role to play in contributing to this dynamic.

Nevertheless, as previously explained, trust levels remain well above the global average, reinforcing the media's role as a trusted information source (*Roper, 2022; Newman, 2024*).

5.3.2 Targeting Citizens' Ability to Vote & Targeting Election-Related Infrastructure

South Africa's *Independent Electoral Commission* (IEC) is often lauded for the free and fair elections it conducts and is widely respected by most South Africans. While no known attempts were made to hinder citizens' ability to vote, citizens' trust in their vote was severely attacked (*Le Roux & Simpson, 2024*).

Voting day was marred by extremely long queuing times. These were attributed to technology failures, specifically to the inefficiencies of newly adopted handheld scanners. However, there is no suggestion that this issue was due to anything other than poor planning or unforeseen circumstances.

What is more of an issue is the MK Party's attempts to sow its 'Big Lie,' which, as already discussed, undermined trust in the election processes and infrastructure.

5.3.3 Targeting Candidates and Political Parties

Referring back to the two main trends observed in this election, the commodification of influence played a big role. Specifically, mercenary 'mega influencers' were contracted by political players to bolster their own narratives and attack their competitors.

A few main strains of commodified influence operations were observed throughout the period of the elections. Ahead of the elections, mega influencer campaigns were observed that:

→ Attacked the DA and bolstered the ANC

→ Attacked the DA and bolstered ActionSA

→ Bolstered the ANC

→ Bolstered the MK Party

→ Bolstered the EFF

Post-elections, we saw mega influencer campaigns that:

→ Attacked the make-up of the proposed coalition government (mostly the inclusion of the DA)

→ Attacked the make-up of the resulting GNU (government of national unity) (mostly the inclusion of the DA)

It is important to note that many mega influencers are sympathetic to the EFF and will conduct or support influence campaigns that bolster that party for ideological reasons. To a lesser degree, some are sympathetic to the ANC and/or the MK Party. In such cases, money does not always change hands.

Cases were also observed where the same mega influencers promoted one party and attacked another party before switching to promote and attack the reverse parties in different campaigns. This underlies the commodified, mercenary nature of this industry-for-hire. The content and intent of the campaigns they work on are rarely scrutinised in detail. Instead, their services go to the highest bidder, whether celebrity, brand, political party or geo-political actor.

5.3.4 Targeting Trust in Democracy

A single event does not undermine trust in democracy. Rather, it is undermined when the pillars that prop it up are undermined: trust in the media, trust in institutions, trust in the democratic process, etc.

South Africa, like most countries in the world, is experiencing attacks on all these pillars, many of which are discussed above. Technology, globalisation and economics are usually the main drivers of the undermining of these pillars, but all are hastened along by cynical political actors who exploit these weaknesses either through opportunistic populism or via considered strategy.

South African democracy's current malaise is this: the media landscape is bifurcating thanks to foreign-funded, shifting ownership patterns and allegiances; trust in institutions is undermined by, for example, highly partisan judicial appointments which are championed through partisan media, commentators & anonymous influencers; attacks on election integrity such as the MK Party's Big Lie; persistent corruption aligned with international deals hampers service delivery and citizen's faith in democracy's ability to deliver a better life.

All of these dynamics are supported by and are proxies for geopolitical interests, and, in many cases, there are FIMI examples to further support these efforts.

6. Conclusion: Recommendations and a Way Forward

As South Africa prepares for the 2026 local government elections, it is crucial to address the challenges and opportunities presented by the use of AI and GenAI-facilitated disinformation content and campaigns.

This section outlines recommendations to strengthen South Africa's electoral and information landscape. It focuses on leveraging AI to enhance democratic processes while safeguarding against potential risks.

AI holds tremendous potential to improve the efficiency, transparency, and fairness of elections. By harnessing AI, South Africa can revolutionise its electoral processes—from voter registration and turnout prediction to vote tallying and election monitoring. AI-driven analytics can help identify patterns of electoral fraud, streamline administrative tasks, and ensure that election outcomes are more accurate and reflective of the will of the people. Additionally, AI can enhance voter education by personalising outreach and combating misinformation through sophisticated detection algorithms that can identify and flag false content in real-time. For example, Rivonia Circle's AI-powered election information chatbot, Thoko, demonstrates an initiative that could be both replicated and scaled up to reach broader audiences ahead of the 2026 election.

However, the same technologies that offer these benefits also present significant risks. As AI technology advances, it can be misused to manipulate voter behaviour through targeted disinformation campaigns, thus undermining public trust in electoral outcomes. The power of AI to amplify misinformation and deepen societal divides is a real threat, particularly in a country with a complex socio-political landscape like South Africa.

Therefore, exploring AI's potential fully is crucial while simultaneously forming robust bulwarks to mitigate its risks. This involves establishing ethical guidelines and regulatory frameworks that govern the development and deployment of AI in electoral contexts. These frameworks should prioritise transparency, accountability, and fairness to ensure that AI applications do not infringe on human rights or compromise the integrity of democratic processes.

The following recommendations are directed at key stakeholders in South Africa's democratic ecosystem, including the technology industry, civil society, legislators and policymakers, academia, and the *Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa* (IEC). Each of these groups has a vital role to play in ensuring that AI is used to strengthen democracy rather than undermine it. By collaborating and implementing these proposals, South Africa can create an electoral environment that embraces innovation and protects the core values of its democracy.

6.1 Academia

South African academia has a critical role in researching and addressing the complex challenges and opportunities that AI presents, ensuring that its development and application contribute positively to human rights and societal well-being. Thus far, South Africa-specific research has been minimal.

6.1.1 Publish and Disseminate Research Findings

→ Prioritise the publication and broad dissemination of research findings in both academic journals and accessible formats for the general public to ensure that the knowledge generated is used to inform public understanding and influence policy and practice.

→ Encourage research that involves local communities, particularly those most affected by AI technologies, in identifying challenges and co-creating solutions.

6.1.2 Establish AI Dedicated Research Centres

→ Create interdisciplinary research centres focused on AI and its implications for human rights and well-being in South Africa. Centralised research hubs can drive focused studies, foster collaboration among AI, law, ethics, and social sciences experts, and attract long-term project funding.

→ Advocate for funding for research projects that explore the intersection of AI, human rights, and social well-being.

→ Encourage partnerships between South African universities, international institutions, and industry to conduct comprehensive studies on AI's social impact, overcome resource constraints, provide diverse perspectives, and ensure that research is globally relevant while remaining locally grounded.

6.1.3 Incorporate AI Ethics and Human Rights into Curricula

→ Integrate AI ethics, human rights, and social impact courses into undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Educating future professionals about the ethical implications of AI will prepare them to design and deploy technologies that respect human rights.

6.1.4 Develop AI Impact Assessment Frameworks

→ Create frameworks for assessing the impact of AI technologies on human rights and social well-being, tailored to South Africa's unique socio-economic and cultural context. These frameworks can guide policymakers, companies, and researchers in evaluating the potential benefits and harms of AI deployments in the country.

6.2 Civil Society

South Africa's civil society is widely trusted and respected, known for its pivotal role in advancing human rights, social justice, and democratic governance. With a strong track record of influencing public policy, advocating for marginalised communities, and holding institutions accountable, South Africa's civil society organisations are well-positioned to drive the necessary reforms in the AI landscape.

Their ability to publish impactful reports, mobilise public opinion, and engage in meaningful advocacy makes them a powerful force in ensuring that AI technologies are developed and deployed in ways that uphold the values of equity, transparency, and human dignity.

6.2.1 Public Education Campaigns:

→ Launch educational campaigns to inform the public about AI, its benefits, potential risks, and its impact on human rights and daily life.

→ Develop and disseminate educational materials and campaigns to raise awareness about AI-generated misinformation, its tactics, and its impact on society.

→ Implement digital literacy training programs that teach individuals how to identify and respond to misinformation, including recognising AI-generated content.

→ Implement programs that enhance digital literacy and AI-related skills, particularly in underserved communities, to ensure they can engage with and benefit from AI technologies.

6.2.2 Advocacy Campaigns

→ Actively participate in policy discussions and consultations related to AI, ensuring that civil society perspectives are included in the formulation of regulations and standards.

→ Support and promote the development of AI solutions that address social challenges and contribute to the public good.

→ Lobby for policies that ensure AI technologies are developed and deployed in ways that respect human rights and are inclusive of all societal groups, particularly marginalised communities.

→ Empower local communities by supporting grassroots initiatives that address the local impacts of AI and provide platforms for their voices to be heard in national and global discussions.

→ Form alliances with other civil society organisations, academia, and international bodies to share knowledge, resources, and strategies for addressing AI-related challenges.

→ Advocate for and educate about the responsible collection, use, and sharing of data, particularly in the context of AI, to protect privacy and prevent misuse.

6.2.3 Combatting AI-generated Misinformation

→ Establishing monitoring systems to track the spread of AI-generated misinformation and report on emerging trends and tactics.

→ Explore AI technology to combat AI-generated misinformation

→ Build publicly accessible tools or platforms to verify AI-generated misinformation

6.3 The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)

6.3.1 AI Code of Ethics

→ Develop a code of ethics for AI use during elections, with input from political parties, social media platforms, civil society and other relevant stakeholders.

→ Implement comprehensive regulations for AI use during elections, including mandatory transparency and auditing of AI systems used by political parties and the IEC.

→ Enforce strict regulations on AI deployment during elections, including mandatory disclosure of AI use by political parties, transparency of AI algorithms, and protection of voter data.

6.3.2 Public Education

→ Develop and disseminate educational materials and campaigns to raise awareness about AI-generated misinformation, its tactics, and its impact on society.

6.3.3 Training and Capacity-Building

→ Organise regular workshops to educate staff on AI technologies, their applications in elections, and how they can be used to improve electoral processes.

→ Develop or partner with educational institutions to offer specialised courses on AI, focusing on its use in electoral management and data analysis, including modules on the ethical use of AI, ensuring staff understand the implications of AI on voter privacy, data security, and transparency.

→ Establish a continuous learning program to keep staff updated on the latest advancements in AI and its evolving role in electoral processes.

6.3.4 Collaboration with Social Media Platforms

→ Partner with tech companies to implement advanced real-time monitoring tools that detect and flag AI-generated disinformation, ensuring timely intervention.

→ Establish joint response teams with tech companies to quickly address and counteract AI-driven misinformation campaigns, leveraging their expertise and technology for practical solutions.

6.4 Legislators and Policymakers

In October 2023, the country's *Department of Communications and Digital Technologies* (DCDT) released a paper for "general discussion purposes and not for publication or academic use", intending to develop a national AI policy involving government, the private sector, academia, and civil society. In August 2024, the South Africa National Artificial Intelligence Policy Framework (*2024*) was published. The AI Policy Framework serves as the government's framework for future AI regulations and a possible AI Act. It aims to develop sector-specific strategies that address the unique needs and opportunities of industries like healthcare, education, and finance.

The framework currently lacks provisions for addressing AI-generated disinformation. However, as a foundational structure, it has the potential to guide future policies, regulations, or guidelines that address this gap. It is crucial that these measures are established well before the 2026 election to safeguard the integrity of the electoral process against AI-driven disinformation and other emerging technological threats.

6.4.1 AI Act:

- Prioritising the crafting and promulgation of an AI Act that serves as a normative framework designed to establish key principles, values, and standards that guide behaviour, decision-making, and the design and deployment of AI technologies. The Act should not attempt to cover every possible scenario or specific application but instead offer guidance, flexibility and adaptation as new challenges and AI technologies emerge.

- Establish a commitment to ensuring AI systems are developed and used fairly, transparently, and free from bias, with a focus on protecting vulnerable and marginalised groups.

- Mandate that AI systems be designed and implemented with ethical considerations, including respect for human rights, privacy, and autonomy.

- Require that AI systems be transparent in their operations, with clear mechanisms for accountability and oversight, ensuring that users and stakeholders can understand and trust the decisions made by AI.

- Ensure that critical decisions made by AI systems involve human oversight, particularly in high-stakes scenarios where AI outcomes have significant impacts on individuals or society.

- Encourage the development of AI technologies that align with South Africa's Bill of Rights.

- Provide a flexible regulatory environment that fosters innovation. Allow guidelines to be adapted as AI technology evolves while ensuring that fundamental ethical principles are upheld.

- Promote collaboration among government, industry, civil society, and academia to continually refine and update AI governance, ensuring diverse perspectives are considered in the ongoing development of AI policies.

6.4.2 AI and Emerging Technologies Regulatory Advisory Board

- A body established by the government to continuously monitor advancements in AI and emerging technologies, assess their implications for society, and ensure that regulatory frameworks remain relevant and effective. The body would provide the government with real-time insights, recommend updates to regulations, and safeguard public interests by ensuring that technological innovations align with ethical standards, legislation, and human rights.

- The body should engage with the public, industry stakeholders, and civil society to ensure transparency in its work, facilitate public consultations, and disseminate findings.

- The board could be composed of a mix of government officials, industry leaders, academic experts, and representatives from civil society.

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