



# SOUTH AFRICA'S ELECTION MARKED BY AN UNEXPECTED LACK OF ARTIFICIALLY GENERATED CONTENT

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Five main trends regarding AI and the 2024 South African elections stand out:

- **Reliance on older technologies rather than cutting-edge generative artificial intelligence (GenAI).** Most of the misleading content included more traditional mis- and disinformation, such as false headlines, allegations of voter fraud, out-of-context images, etc.
- **Necessity of cross-sector collaborations to counter misinformation.** The Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) signed a framework of cooperation with Google, Meta and TikTok, as well as with local civic partner Media Monitoring Africa (MMA), to combat disinformation ahead of the 2024 election. This framework helped to counter the spread false and misleading content on the participating platforms.
- **Deliberate vagueness on AI as a political tactic.** The abovementioned cross-sector counter-disinformation framework does not include any AI-specific measures, and South Africa currently has no specific regulations governing the use of artificial intelligence for political purposes. Existing codes of conduct are outdated and provide little guidance on whether a politician may use GenAI to create content.
- **Liars' dividend.** Similar to the tactic of plausible deniability in India, politicians capitalize on the spread of AI-generated content by creating uncertainty and confusion around what is true and what is false. In South Africa, politicians did not necessarily have to use GenAI themselves in order to benefit from it; referring to GenAI allowed politicians to call any unflattering information into question by raising doubt about the veracity of a video or image.
- **X (previously Twitter) as a proliferator of AI manipulated content.** X played a central role in both the spread and, more importantly, the longevity of misleading AI-content. X was notably absent from the framework of cooperation mentioned above, and the platform removed little to no disinformation.

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## NOTEWORTHY HIGHLIGHTS

**Two reasons** underpinned concerns about voter manipulation in South Africa with AI content in the 2024 national elections:

- **The competitiveness of this election.** The 2024 contest was more competitive than previous ones, as the dominant party (the African National Congress, or ANC) had been suffering from legitimacy loss and internal disarray.
- **The country's regular political violence.** False and misleading content had previously fueled violent outbursts in the country, and the potential for higher volumes of hate speech as well as more sophisticated hate speech increased concerns over AI during the South African elections.

**Two unique findings** stand out:

- **AI in plain sight.** Much AI-generated content was extremely crude, with much of it even featuring the AI software's watermark and/or logo. This indicates that the AI content was mainly created by amateurs rather than large campaigns/political professionals.
- **Prominent Americans in most significant examples of South African GenAI political content.** President Biden, previous President Trump, and the rapper Eminem were all main characters in AI political content during the South African elections. However, although both the Biden and Eminem videos were spread across multiple platforms and used to endorse different political parties, neither video appeared to have been shared by politicians or official political party accounts.

**One important, underreported finding** emerged:

- **The audio-WhatsApp nexus.** AI-fabricated audio has the “potential to spread like wildfire” in South Africa, where over 90% of internet users rely on WhatsApp. It is much more difficult to identify whether an audio message was manipulated than a video message, and it requires much less skill and effort to manipulate audio. In addition, WhatsApp's encryption makes it much more difficult to counter disinformation, leaving users vulnerable to manipulation.

## KEY TERMS

- *Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI)* refers to computer systems that draw on extremely large datasets to make statistical inferences about the relationship between words in a body of text or pixels from an image. From these inferences, GenAI systems can produce human-like content quickly in response to human-provided prompts.
- *Large language models (LLMs)* are a form of GenAI that are trained on billions of words of human-produced text. For example, ChatGPT is powered by an LLM.
- *Synthetic Media*, or “deepfakes,” can be created by generative AI in the form of imagery, audio, or video.

## INTRODUCTION

Leading up to South Africa’s election, polling data indicated that, for the first time in the country’s democratic history, the ANC would likely not win the majority of votes.<sup>1</sup> The 2024 election looked set to be the most contested election since apartheid was ended 30 years ago, and there was a big question mark around whether generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) would impact voting. A December 2023 report showed that between 2022–2023, the number of deepfakes in South Africa increased by 1,200 percent, making it the African country most exposed to deepfakes.<sup>2</sup> Amidst this uptick in the spread of deepfakes, the head of the government agency in charge of overseeing the elections noted that South Africa was entering “uncharted territory” when it came to the impact AI could have on the election process.<sup>3</sup>

A report released in January 2024 provided evidence to show that content posted to social media could have a direct impact on the ground, fanning the flames of real-world violence and exacerbating pre-existing societal fissures, particularly during politically tumultuous events.<sup>4</sup> Warnings were sounded over the potential impact AI could have on one of the most contested elections since apartheid was ended, especially if polarising artificially generated content were to be injected into South Africa’s incendiary social media environment.

For example, the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa warned that AI technology could be used to impersonate political figures during the election cycle using “highly realistic fake videos or audio recordings.”<sup>5</sup> However, some academics did not think that South African political parties or individual politicians could use sophisticated GenAI technology to create deepfakes that were convincing enough to impact election results.<sup>6</sup> In response, counter-disinformation specialists argued that politicians, particularly those with a history of using online platforms to incite violence and spread disinformation, would not necessarily have to make manipulated content appear convincing;<sup>7</sup> even crudely generated, cheaply made artificial content, easily identified by viewers as fake, could cause significant damage.

Despite the consternation leading up to the election, in reality, South African voters were exposed to very little content created by GenAI. The majority of the misleading content spread during the election was traditional mis- and disinformation, such as false headlines, allegations of voter fraud, out-of-context images, etc. There were a handful of examples of content created using GenAI technology, but the content itself was not sophisticated, consisting primarily of poorly generated videos that were easily identifiable as fabricated, spread on both open social media platforms and closed messaging platforms.

## **DISINFORMATION AND SOUTH AFRICA’S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE**

South Africa’s National Assembly consists of 400 members, with seats allocated proportionally by the number of votes each political party receives. In the 30 years since apartheid was ended, the ANC had always received enough votes to control the majority of the National Assembly. However, in 2024, for the first time in South Africa’s democratic history, pre-election polls consistently indicated that support for the ANC had fallen well below 50 percent; voters were indicating that they were unhappy with the current government.<sup>8</sup>

Although 52 political parties appeared on the national ballot, three political parties had historically been the clear front runners: the ANC; the Democratic Alliance (DA), the country’s official opposition party; and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the third-largest party, led by controversial former ANC member Julius Malema. This political landscape changed in December 2023, when former president Jacob Zuma put the ANC under pressure by endorsing the newly-formed Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) party and becoming the party’s figurehead.<sup>9</sup> It quickly became clear the MK party would receive a significant number of votes, many of them from voters in Zuma’s home province and from disillusioned ANC supporters. Although the party was only a few months old, pre-election polls indicated that it would likely receive more votes than the EFF, making it the third-largest political party in the country.<sup>10</sup>

However, the seeming rapid growth in support for the MK party on social media was called into question by a report released by researchers at the Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change (CABC), who monitor South African social media for evidence of online narrative manipulation.<sup>11</sup> CABC researchers found that a group of anonymous X accounts with hundreds of thousands of followers seemingly flipped their party allegiance overnight.<sup>12</sup> This group of accounts had risen to prominence following a racially-motivated disinformation campaign orchestrated on behalf of Zuma in an attempt to cover up corruption scandals while he was president.\* Before the MK party was formed, the accounts had generally supported the EFF and opposed president Cyril Ramaphosa. CABC researchers noted that soon after the MK Party was officially launched in December 2023, the accounts rapidly mobilized around the party through hashtags such as #VoteMK2024, no longer supporting the EFF. Other parties were also accused of spreading disinformation during the electoral cycle. The ANC, for example, issued a media statement calling out the DA's "deliberate disinformation campaign" regarding the ANC's development policy and strategy.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, pre-election polls were relatively accurate: the ANC won just over 40 percent of the vote, with the DA coming in in second place with just under 22 percent. The MK party won 14.6 percent of the votes, becoming the third-largest political party ahead of the EFF, which received just under 10 percent of the national vote. However, the MK party did not accept the election results, and they embarked on a campaign to delegitimize the IEC by spreading disinformation about election rigging.<sup>14</sup> At time of writing the party had withdrawn its application to challenge the election at the Electoral Court, but the case was still slated to be adjudicated.<sup>15</sup>

## **Cooperation with Social Media Companies**

In July of 2023, the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC), the government body in charge of overseeing elections, announced it had signed a framework of cooperation with Google, Meta, TikTok, and local civic partner Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) to combat disinformation ahead of the 2024 election.<sup>16</sup> The framework itself was not made publicly

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\* UK-based PR company Bell Pottinger was responsible for mounting a racially divisive campaign to deflect attention away from then-president Jacob Zuma, other ANC members, and the Guptas, a family accused of corruption in connection to Zuma. Sockpuppet accounts commonly known as the Guptabots inauthentically amplified terms like "White Monopoly Capital" and "Radical Economic Transformation (RET)" in an attempt to sow discord in South Africa, which has severe socio-economic inequality. CABC researchers noted that a group of anonymous accounts called the "RET group" appeared online after Cyril Ramaphosa of the ANC was elected president in 2017, and they maintained a steadily-growing following over the last few years. The accounts are typically anti-Ramaphosa and supportive of Zuma.

available, but the official government announcement made no mention of any AI-specific measures, instead focusing on how the signatories would work together to prevent the spread of content that might impact voters.

In a separate statement, Meta announced that it would remove content on Facebook and Instagram that violated policies on voter suppression or that could contribute to offline violence.<sup>17</sup> The company said it would work with independent fact checkers to label problematic content, including content created or edited by AI tools or software, and reduce its distribution so fewer users would be exposed to it.

The social media platforms also agreed to cooperate with the IEC and MMA on real411, a platform that allowed social media users to report violative content, including hate speech, incitement to violence and mis- and disinformation, before, during, and after the election.

According to the real411 website, each complaint submitted would be reviewed by a complaints committee made up of a legal expert, a digital expert, and a media expert—real live humans, not an automated system or AI.<sup>18</sup> Once the complaint had been investigated, real411 would either issue a media statement, refer the complaint to the Electoral Court if it violated the Electoral Code of Conduct, or send the complaint to the relevant social media platform for review against that platform’s policies.

Elon Musk’s X was notably absent from this framework of cooperation. Although X is not the most used social media platform in South Africa, during the electoral period the platform was home to the most prolific spread of mis- and disinformation.<sup>19</sup> According to a report by MMA, 68 percent of the complaints reported to the real411 platform that were ultimately labeled as disinformation originated on X.<sup>20</sup> In addition, said MMA’s director William Bird, signatory platforms like TikTok and Meta removed content that violated the code of conduct when they were alerted to it, but X did nothing.<sup>21</sup>

## **AI Policies**

South Africa does not currently have any specific regulations or laws in place regulating the use of AI in electioneering. In a Briefing of Domestic Observers for 2024 National and Provincial Elections, the International Development Research Center (IDRC) noted that while the IEC was aware AI was on the horizon, the organization did not appear to have a comprehensive strategy to tackle the impact AI could have on elections.<sup>22</sup> At the same briefing IEC Provincial Election Officer Michael Hendrickse noted that the current laws were outdated, saying: “Our laws were written in the 1990s; we need to get better at understanding the digital landscape.”

The Electoral Code of Conduct prohibits political parties from spreading false information if the information concerns other politicians or political parties.<sup>23</sup> The Electoral Act of 1998 provides more granular information on what can and cannot be shared, but does not specifically address social media content, let alone GenAI-created content. Section 89 of the Act specifically refers to “intentionally false statements”; section 89(1) states that “no person, when required in terms of this Act to make a statement, may make the statement (a) knowing that it is false; or (b) without believing on reasonable grounds that the statement is true”; and section 89(2) states that “no person may publish any false information with the intention of (a) disruption or preventing an election; (b) creating hostility or fear in order to influence the conduct or outcome of an election; or (c) influencing the conduct or outcome of an election.”<sup>24</sup>

Currently, the Act contains little information about how to apply it to the use of deepfakes and other GenAI content by politicians. Specifically, there does not appear to be any clarity on whether a politician using GenAI to create content of, for example, Jacob Zuma spreading false information about another political party would contravene the Code of Conduct, or whether the AI itself would dilute the politician’s accountability—in other words, whether the fact that an algorithm did the content generation provides a high enough degree of separation to let politicians off the hook.

While it has not happened yet, it is possible the Electoral Act will be invoked in the future if politicians use GenAI to influence elections by either spreading false information about other candidates or spreading fear or incitement to violence. However, political parties have recently invoked other laws to initiate legal action when GenAI has been used to impersonate politicians. In November 2023, a deepfake audio of DA member of parliament Glynnis Breytenbach spread across TikTok. The video showed Breytenbach appearing to spout conspiracy theories, talking about the party taking loans from the Bezos Foundation and America wanting the DA-run Western Cape to control sea routes.<sup>25</sup> The DA initiated legal proceedings against the business owner who created the audio under the Cybercrimes Act, which prohibits cyber fraud, cyber forgery and cyber uttering.

Another potential avenue of recourse for victims of digitally falsified political content is a privacy rights approach. South Africa’s Information Regulator noted, in a Guideline Note on the Processing of Personal Information of Voters and the Countering of Misinformation and Disinformation, that mis- and disinformation could violate a voter’s right to privacy, specifically in relation to the “protection of personal information of a person whose voice and/or image is used without their consent to spread fake messages, particularly in instances where genAI is used.”<sup>26</sup>

## GenAI Content

Although social media platforms were as not overrun with fabricated videos and images as had been predicted, there was evidence of politically-motivated artificially generated content gaining significant traction during the election cycle; however, much of the violative content was removed from those social media platforms that signed the framework of cooperation. Africa Check, an independent fact checking organization, noted that most of the AI content shared online was crudely generated and easy to spot, often created using free software and even retaining the AI software’s watermark.<sup>27</sup> According to Africa Check, seeming authenticity is not necessarily that important for manipulated content; poorly generated and obviously fake content can still reach a large number of viewers and cause damage.<sup>28</sup>

One of the most realistic synthetic images that was spread before the election showed a road riddled with potholes in Cape Town, with the city’s iconic mountain in the background.<sup>29</sup> Using reverse image search, AFP found the original content self-labeled as “Ai Art Photography” on Instagram. The Instagram post contains several synthetic images of poorly maintained roads and refers to poor government service delivery in the caption. The Facebook cross-post, which had thousands of engagements, similarly implied that Cape Town provides poor service delivery on the outskirts of the city.



Figure 1: A photorealistic image showing potholes in Cape Town was identified as AI-generated by AFP.



Another example of an AI-generated image was posted by the Referendum Party (RP), a single-issue party focused on forcing a referendum in the Western Cape (a province in South Africa that includes Cape Town) that would allow the Western Cape to secede from South Africa.<sup>30</sup> On April 17, the party posted a pair of images that appeared to position the current DA- and ANC-run Western Cape as a failed state and to compare it to a first-world country run by the RP. The failed state image, which carries the logo of the ANC and the DA, depicts a bleak scene with dilapidated shacks and a river filled with trash; the first-world version shows an idealized, colorful version of Cape Town and bears the RP logo. Unlike the pothole image, these images are not photorealistic and were likely intended to evoke emotion rather than to deceive viewers.



In 2024, you will be voting for one of two possible futures.

Vote for security, freedom and prosperity for ALL the people of the Western Cape. Vote Referendum Party.

[#referendumparty](#) [#capeindependence](#)



12:29 PM · Apr 17, 2024 · 361 Views

Figure 2: The RP used AI to create imaginary comparisons of the Western Cape as run by the ANC and DA versus the Western Cape as run by the RP.

One of the first examples of fabricated video content that spread widely across social media ahead of the 2024 elections appeared to show US rapper Eminem endorsing the EFF and denouncing the ANC for “failing black people.”<sup>31</sup> The fabricated video was created by editing real footage of Eminem from 2009 and overlaying it with AI-generated audio. Because the fabrication used a pre-existing video, only the rapper’s mouth movements looked manipulated, making it harder to identify the video as false.

In their debunk of the video, Africa Check included multiple links to posts that reshared the content. At time of writing, it appeared that TikTok had removed all instances of the doctored image and Instagram had removed some and labeled others as false information; in contrast, YouTube retained the content, with only one video labeled as containing altered or synthetic content, and on X, all of the content (some of which was shared by blue-check accounts with tens of thousands of followers) also remained on-platform without a “manipulated media” label.



Figure 3: A verified X user with over 20,000 followers posted a copy of a TikTok video alleging to show US rapper Eminem endorsing the ANC. X has not labeled it as manipulated media.

A less sophisticated fake celebrity endorsement featuring US President Joe Biden was also posted across multiple social media platforms. The content appeared to show President Biden saying that if the ANC were to win the election, the US, backed by the European Union, would immediately declare South Africa an “enemy state” and impose sanctions on the country.<sup>32</sup> Unlike the Eminem video, the Biden video was not based on real video footage. Instead, the creator used a free trial version of an AI tool called Parrot AI (the company’s logo is visible in the video) to animate a pre-loaded image of Biden, making it appear as if he was speaking. The video was removed from most platforms, but it is still available on X.

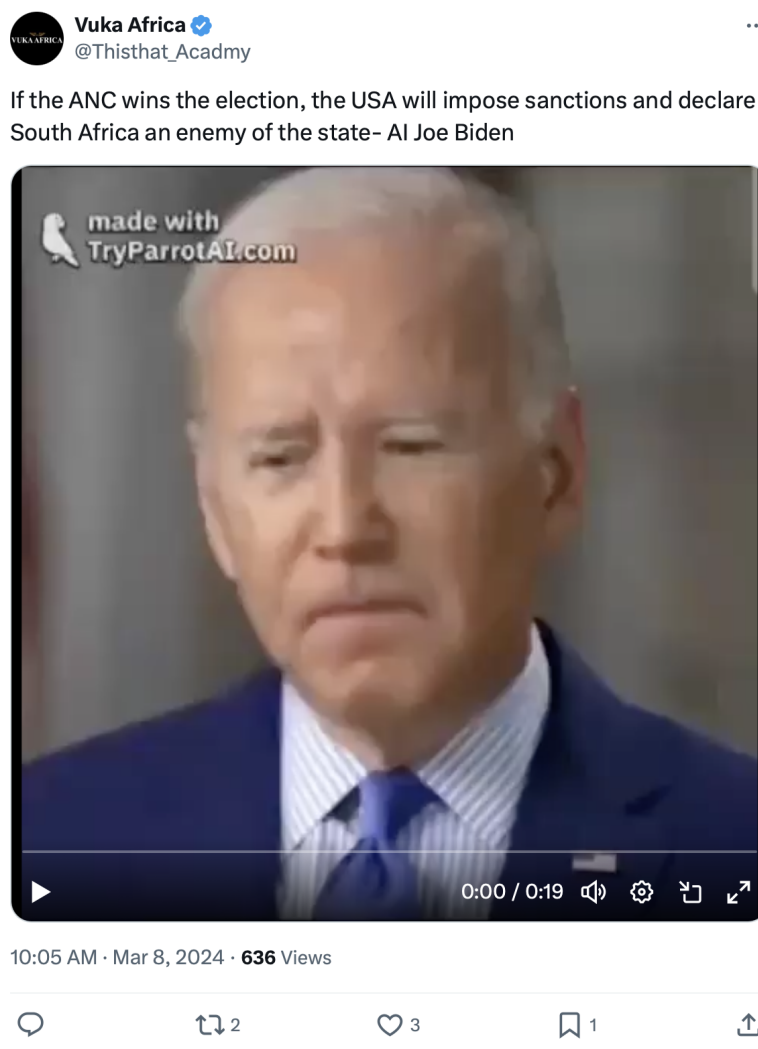


Figure 4: A copy of the fabricated Joe Biden video is still available on X. The ‘made with TryParrotAI.com’ logo is clearly visible.

Although the Biden and Eminem videos were both spread across multiple platforms, neither video appears to have been shared by politicians or political parties. It is likely that these videos were created by supporters of the respective parties, rather than forming part of a wider official political campaign.

A more egregious example of politically-motivated artificially generated content was shared by Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla, daughter of former president Jacob Zuma and an MK party candidate. On March 9, just over a month before the elections were slated to take place, Zuma-Sambudla shared a video on X of former US president Donald Trump seeming to endorse her father's MK party.<sup>33</sup> In the video, Trump appears to urge South Africans to vote for the MK party, claiming that Ramaphosa's African National Congress has failed and that all South Africans will matter under president Jacob Zuma's "black party."



Figure 5: A fabricated post by former president Jacob Zuma's daughter is labeled as manipulated media by X.

Many users pointed out that the video was fake, noting the tell-tale mismatch between the audio and Trump's lip movements that show it was artificially generated (with some users even replying to her tweet with their own AI-generated Trumps saying the tweet was synthetic). Nevertheless, Zuma-Sambudla shared the video with the hashtag #VoteMK2024 without indicating that it was manipulated or outwardly naming it as satire.

As counter-disinformation specialist Phumzille van Damme noted, Zuma-Sambudla's post cannot be viewed in isolation as a crude manipulation shared by an account with little political influence.<sup>34</sup> In recent years, Zuma-Sambudla has been identified as a central node in multiple disinformation campaigns. She was labeled as one of the most prominent accounts that posted and shared incendiary material on X, celebrating the violence and unrest that followed her father's arrest in July 2021.<sup>35</sup> Zuma-Sambudla also actively spread disinformation to shore up support for her father. For example, researchers identified posts where Zuma-Sambudla shared old images of protests, attaching rally cries to them and claiming they had taken place in July 2021.<sup>36</sup>

According to a Wired article, a significant amount of the content MMA labeled as disinformation that originated on X was spread by Zuma-Sambudla.<sup>37</sup> She was a major supporter of the MK party's claims of election fraud, calling for the arrest of IEC head Janet Love and spreading allegations that the agency had collaborated with opposition parties to rig the election.<sup>38</sup>

## **GenAI and Closed Messaging Applications**

In her analysis of the Trump video, van Damme noted that, while the visual content was poor, the audio clearly sounded like Donald Trump, matching his unique tone of voice and manner of speaking, as well as mispronouncing words that South African language speakers would expect non-native speakers to struggle with. As an audio-only soundbyte, stripped of the crude visual content, the fabricated media appeared significantly more believable. This is often the case: fabricated or manipulated audio is significantly harder to identify than audiovisual content, and relatively trivial to create.<sup>39</sup> According to a Poynter investigation, tools to identify deepfake audio consistently lag behind tools to create deepfake audio.<sup>40</sup>

Fabricated content, such as a realistic-sounding voice note of Donald Trump seeming to endorse a specific political party, has the potential to spread like wildfire in South Africa, where roughly 93 percent of internet users rely on WhatsApp as their primary mode of communication: the app has no content moderation, or tools to identify and label fabricated content, and as a result AI-generated disinformation can spread unchecked.<sup>41</sup> There is evidence that generated content was indeed spread via WhatsApp: some of the manipulated content that was debunked by Africa Check, including the Biden video,

was sent to the organization via its “What’s Crap on WhatsApp” platform, which allows WhatsApp users to forward content they think is fake to Africa Check without leaving the application. Searching “WhatsApp” on the real411 website returns tens of results, including false and misleading claims, disinformation and incitement to violence.

The South African Human Rights Commission noted in its report on the July 2021 unrest that closed messaging platforms had been used to spread disinformation in the past, making the platform a prime vector for the proliferation of generated or misleading content.

## **CONCLUSION: SHOULD SOUTH AFRICA BE CONCERNED ABOUT GEN AI?**

In their post-election summary of the use of GenAI in the South African election, Africa Check argued that South Africa’s false information ecosystem is already thriving, even without artificially generated content being added into the mix.<sup>42</sup> According to human rights lawyers Arnold Tsunga and David Mburu, in countries like South Africa with heavily contested elections and polarized information environments, GenAI allows bad actors to influence the election using the four Vs: volume, velocity, virality and verisimilitude.<sup>43</sup> But in the case of South Africa’s 2024 election cycle, there is no evidence that GenAI was used to create high volumes of viral content that appeared convincingly realistic.

Much of the content that was debunked by Africa Check and real411 was traditional political mis- and disinformation, and of the AI-generated content they identified, cheap fakes—content created using easily accessible video and image editing tools—were far more common than sophisticated deepfakes. Posts that went viral during the election cycle included claims of vote rigging, fabricated news headlines and misattributed images claiming to show evidence of election fraud. Old content was recycled, and the same narratives that have continuously posed a risk to election integrity across multiple election cycles continued to thrive without the need for GenAI.

But politicians do not necessarily have to use GenAI themselves in order to benefit from it. The mere existence of GenAI content allows politicians and political candidates to call information into question and raise doubt about the veracity of a real video or image. A 2018 paper investigating the harms of deepfakes noted what the researchers called the “liar’s dividend”: as the general public becomes more aware that GenAI technology can realistically fake audiovisual content, liars attempting to dodge accountability for their actions can denounce real evidence as being artificially generated.<sup>44</sup>

The liar’s dividend has already paid out in South Africa: DA member of parliament Renaldo Gouws tried to brush off an old video of him spewing extremely racist and homophobic vitrol as a fake that was created by AI.<sup>45</sup> The video, which was originally posted by Gouws himself

to YouTube on March 11, 2010, was resurfaced in June 2024 using the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine.<sup>46</sup> Gouws' attempts at claiming the video was artificially generated were unsuccessful; the GenAI technology to create realistic deepfakes did not exist in 2010, and, at time of writing, Gouws had been suspended pending further investigation.

From a platform perspective, X remains one of the biggest concerns for future elections with regard to the rapid proliferation of artificially generated content. If the IEC maintains its existing relationships with other social media platforms, its ability to tackle mis- and disinformation with local partners will likely continue to pay dividends. However, as MMA noted in its report, the overwhelming majority of content labeled as disinformation was spread on X, which is not part of the framework of cooperation. Some of the artificially generated content that TikTok and Facebook removed remained available on X without even a manipulated media label.

Moving forward, the IEC will potentially have to investigate how the Electoral Act could be applied to false content spread using GenAI, particularly in situations where it might be impossible to identify the original creator. If the use of deepfakes in South Africa continues to rise and GenAI technology becomes more accessible, it is very likely the next election will see far more content being spread—and perhaps a far bigger impact on election results.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This report is part of a series commissioned by editors Dr. Inga Trauthig and Dr. Samuel Woolley. The series compiles short investigations into the role of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) before, during and after several key elections in 2024: national elections in India, Mexico, South Africa, the U.S. and European Elections (U.K. and French snap elections and European Parliament). Individual authors were free to choose their analytic focus depending upon the given region and context. This series adds both analyses of standing literature and empirical insights into the potential impacts of GenAI on key democratic processes. These insights are critical to groups working to sustain and advance democracies in the face of constant transformation of the digital environment and associated communication processes. The series is a project of the Propaganda Research Lab, Center for Media Engagement at The University of Texas at Austin.

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