# AI’s algorithmic threat to social cohesion demands urgent global governance



Artificial Intelligence (AI) is driving a transformative wave across social media platforms, fundamentally altering how information is shared and consumed. Capable of powering recommendation engines, moderating content, personalising feeds, and even generating posts that convincingly mimic human output, AI blurs the lines between authenticity and deception. Despite its potential to democratise access to information and foster deeper connections, this technology also poses significant threats to truth, social cohesion, and the stability of democratic institutions.

At its most beneficial, AI enhances user experience—facilitating accessibility, assisting in content moderation, and improving the relevance of information. It can detect hate speech, combat disinformation, and elevate underrepresented voices in social campaigns. Features like real-time translation and speech recognition contribute to a more inclusive digital environment. However, the darker implications of AI are becoming increasingly evident. Social media algorithms, driven by AI, often prioritise engagement over accuracy, promoting emotionally charged content that can lead to widespread misinformation and polarisation. The rapid spread of deepfakes and fabricated narratives contributes to a precarious post-truth society, where misleading information often takes root before the truth can catch up.

This is not merely a theoretical concern. The January 2021 riots in South Africa, which led to over 300 fatalities and widespread destruction, exemplify the catastrophic potential of algorithmically amplified misinformation. Inflammatory social media content played a decisive role, many posts subsequently proven to be misleading or completely untrue. Similarly, viral accusations against migrants, typically lacking substantive evidence, have incited xenophobic violence, while misinformation surrounding land reform and employment equity continues to distort public discourse.

In light of these dangers, there is an urgent need to implement robust regulatory frameworks that mandate algorithmic transparency and encourage plurality in the narratives presented by social media platforms. This is not about stifling free expression; rather, it is about equipping citizens with the information necessary to engage critically with complex issues. Regulators should insist on notifying users when they engage with AI-generated content and enforcing stringent transparency standards for algorithms that disseminate political messaging. Failure to do so will allow disinformation to persist as an accepted aspect of public opinion, erasing accountability and trust in democratic processes.

At a national level, countries including South Africa must elevate AI governance as a paramount public policy concern. However, this critical issue cannot be tackled in isolation; it demands international cooperation. The G20, with its unique ability to unite the world's largest economies, is particularly well-positioned to spearhead the establishment of a global framework for ethical AI and algorithmic accountability.

Recent dialogues among G20 member states have signalled a growing acknowledgment of AI's risks, yet there remains a glaring need for cohesive regulatory coordination. China’s President Xi Jinping, speaking at a G20 summit, has underscored the importance of making AI development accessible to all nations, particularly those in the Global South. His comments reflect a broader movement within international governance that seeks to prevent the monopolisation of AI by wealthier nations. In line with this sentiment, an advisory body established by the United Nations has proposed foundational principles for the ethical deployment of AI globally.

The stakes are critical, with various recommendations aimed at shaping a safer AI landscape. These include the need for algorithmic explainability, which empowers users with insight into content curation processes, and the necessity for cross-border cooperation to combat AI misuse in political contexts. The UN’s interim report highlights the creation of a global AI fund and an international dialogue on governance to ensure equitable access to technological advancements, reflecting a commitment to fostering inclusive institutions.

South Africa’s unique socio-political context amplifies the urgency of these discussions. The country's fragile social fabric is at risk from the unchecked proliferation of misinformation, further eroding public trust, as noted in the 2025 South African Social Cohesion Index. Addressing these challenges necessitates a multifaceted approach that includes integrating AI literacy into educational curriculums, establishing a digital ethics commission for oversight, and advocating for international standards that protect democratic integrity.

Civil society, alongside independent media, must also play a pivotal role. Investing in fact-checking capabilities and promoting media literacy are essential steps toward cultivating a more informed public. The goal is to shift societal values towards verification, rather than the allure of virality.

The integration of AI into social media platforms is an unavoidable reality; however, whether it fortifies or fractures our societies hinges upon the effectiveness of our regulatory frameworks. There is an urgent need for a global conversation rooted in ethical responsibility and democratic values. The G20 and nations like South Africa must take the lead in this dialogue. Without meaningful intervention, AI risks perpetuating a cycle where engagement triumphs over truth, jeopardising the very foundations of democracy and collective understanding.

As we navigate this digital landscape, it becomes evident that the ramifications of AI's role are vast and profound. Our democratic values, social cohesion, and even our perception of shared realities are at stake—a situation that demands decisive action and collaboration on a global scale.

Daryl Swanepoel is the chief executive of the Inclusive Society Institute and presented this perspective at the Türkiye-Africa Media Forum in Istanbul, calling for sustained dialogue at the forthcoming G20 summit in Johannesburg.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://mg.co.za/thought-leader/2025-06-10-ai-and-social-media-a-double-edged-sword-that-demands-responsibility/), [[4]](https://time.com/6694375/un-artificial-intelligence-world-governments-summit/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://mg.co.za/thought-leader/2025-06-10-ai-and-social-media-a-double-edged-sword-that-demands-responsibility/), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/f755788da7d5905fcc2d44edf93c4bec), [[5]](https://apnews.com/article/610b8f16aac4d36aa8a56c88de2ca09f)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/world/chinas-xi-tells-g20-summit-ai-should-not-be-game-rich-countries-xinhua-reports-2024-11-18/), [[6]](https://www.reuters.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/un-advisory-body-makes-seven-recommendations-governing-ai-2024-09-19/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/f755788da7d5905fcc2d44edf93c4bec), [[4]](https://time.com/6694375/un-artificial-intelligence-world-governments-summit/), [[6]](https://www.reuters.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/un-advisory-body-makes-seven-recommendations-governing-ai-2024-09-19/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/world/chinas-xi-tells-g20-summit-ai-should-not-be-game-rich-countries-xinhua-reports-2024-11-18/), [[5]](https://apnews.com/article/610b8f16aac4d36aa8a56c88de2ca09f)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://mg.co.za/thought-leader/2025-06-10-ai-and-social-media-a-double-edged-sword-that-demands-responsibility/), [[4]](https://time.com/6694375/un-artificial-intelligence-world-governments-summit/), [[6]](https://www.reuters.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/un-advisory-body-makes-seven-recommendations-governing-ai-2024-09-19/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://mg.co.za/thought-leader/2025-06-10-ai-and-social-media-a-double-edged-sword-that-demands-responsibility/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://apnews.com/article/f755788da7d5905fcc2d44edf93c4bec> - A United Nations advisory body has called for the establishment of inclusive institutions to regulate artificial intelligence (AI). The group acknowledged AI's potential to revolutionize fields such as science, healthcare, and energy but warned of its risks if left unregulated. Recommendations include forming an international scientific panel on AI, initiating a global dialogue on AI governance at the U.N., and creating a global AI fund to ensure equitable technological benefits. This report precedes the U.N.’s Summit of the Future, aiming to unify global efforts in addressing AI's challenges.
3. <https://www.reuters.com/world/chinas-xi-tells-g20-summit-ai-should-not-be-game-rich-countries-xinhua-reports-2024-11-18/> - At the G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasized that artificial intelligence (AI) should not be monopolized by wealthy countries. Xi advocated for increased international governance and cooperation in AI development and expressed China's commitment to aiding developing nations. He highlighted an initiative in collaboration with three other G20 members to assist the Global South in accessing scientific and technological advancements. Additionally, Xi called for reforms in global trade governance and criticized the imposition of tariffs on Chinese products under the guise of green development, promoting a more open global economy.
4. <https://time.com/6694375/un-artificial-intelligence-world-governments-summit/> - In an effort to regulate artificial intelligence (AI) on a global scale, the United Nations has established a 39-member advisory body that began working last fall to propose recommendations for AI governance. The group has released an interim report titled "Governing AI for Humanity," which includes suggestions for ethical deployment, accountability, and inclusivity of AI. The co-chair, Carme Artigas, emphasized that these recommendations must be binding to be effective. Speaking at the World Governments Summit in Dubai, Artigas highlighted the importance of leveraging the trust and legitimacy of the UN to ensure meaningful and enforceable regulations.
5. <https://apnews.com/article/610b8f16aac4d36aa8a56c88de2ca09f> - Pope Francis became the first pope to attend a G7 summit, held in Bari, Italy, where he addressed the risks and ethical implications of artificial intelligence (AI). He urged world leaders to ensure AI development remains human-centered to preserve human dignity and decision-making. The G7 leaders responded with pledges to coordinate AI governance and regulatory frameworks, emphasizing a human-centered, inclusive digital transformation. Pope Francis highlighted the dangers of AI in both civil and military domains, specifically calling for a ban on lethal autonomous weapons. The G7 leaders acknowledged the need for responsible AI use in the military, adhering to international laws. The summit reflected Francis' influence, reminiscent of the impactful 2005 Gleneagles summit. The G7 members have been active in AI regulation, with various initiatives such as Japan’s Hiroshima AI process, the European Union's AI Act, and regulatory efforts from the United States, United Kingdom, and United Nations.
6. <https://www.reuters.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/un-advisory-body-makes-seven-recommendations-governing-ai-2024-09-19/> - An artificial intelligence advisory body at the United Nations has issued a final report with seven recommendations to address AI-related risks and governance gaps. Created last year, this 39-member advisory body aims to provide impartial and reliable scientific knowledge about AI, addressing information asymmetries between AI labs and the rest of the world. Key recommendations include the establishment of a global AI standards exchange, a global AI capacity development network, and a new policy dialogue on AI governance. The U.N. also proposes a global AI fund to address capacity gaps and the creation of a global AI data framework for ensuring transparency and accountability. Furthermore, they recommend a small AI office to support and coordinate the implementation of these measures. These recommendations will be discussed at a U.N. summit later this month. The report highlights concerns about the rapid spread of AI since the release of OpenAI's ChatGPT, warning about issues like misinformation and copyright infringement. While the European Union has been proactive with a comprehensive AI Act, the U.S. has opted for voluntary compliance, and China focuses on social stability and state control.
7. <https://apnews.com/article/023ac08e04db5a2109cf35f8b8c9b102> - Fumio Kishida, the Prime Minister of Japan, introduced a global regulatory framework for generative AI during a speech at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in Paris. The framework is part of international efforts to establish governance for the fast-evolving technology. Kishida acknowledged generative AI's potential to enhance the world but emphasized the need to address risks like disinformation. Last year, under Japan's leadership during the G7 summit, the Hiroshima AI Process was initiated to develop guiding principles and a code of conduct for AI developers. The framework, now supported by 49 nations and regions, aims to promote safe, secure, and trustworthy AI globally. Major entities like the European Union, the United States, and China are currently working on their AI regulations and oversight measures, with global organizations like the United Nations also involved in these efforts.