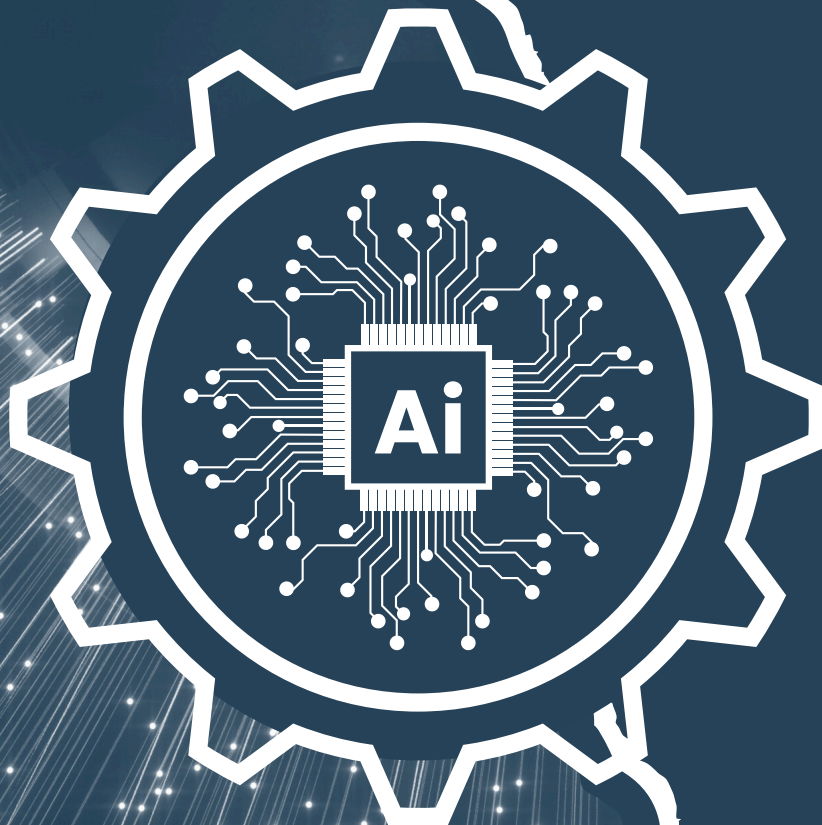# AI in Africa

Do we understand its potential (for democracy and economic growth)?

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Introduction

Much has been written about the potential of an Artificial Intelligence (AI)-led society-wide transformation and in some cases revolution. It has been touted by many as potentially transformative and with the capacity to radicalise how society is organised. However, what kind of progress do we anticipate from AI? To the majority of us, our interaction with AI is through free-access-based platforms such as DeepSeek, WhatsApp's Meta, ChatGPT and others. Yet there is a lot more to AI than we have yet to understand. I am no expert on AI, and my entry point into this discussion is to bring a non-expert voice to the subject. My interest in this subject is in relation to how AI potentially contributes towards Africa's quest for democracy and economic transformation. The concerns for democracy and progress in our economy are urgent across the continent. Africa is at some form of a crossroads – whether to deepen or undo democratisation, and on the other hand, to give up on the development project or pursue a different path. AI may play an important role in determining the path Africa will pursue. Do we know much about AI? A few of us might, but the majority do not know about the technology-based revolution that awaits us in both political and economic spheres. As already stated, there is vast literature on the potential of AI, and I have deliberately decided to focus more on the potential challenges it presents.

AI, the Truth and Escalation of Conflict

Mass communication scholars have always defended the need for free media as a basis for a strong democratic culture. How does AI deepen or undo free media? Existing literature suggests that AI can push an agenda. Again, it depends on the algorithm. First, let me explain the algorithm in layman's terms. It is a system used to decide what kind of information one should receive based on their previous online activities, and here is a strange one also, based on your location. This is part of an effort to ensure that one is receiving relevant news, whether on X (*formerly known as Twitter*), Facebook, YouTube, or even WhatsApp channels. Harari in Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI (2024) has a fascinating case study of how Facebook feeds were used to escalate violence against the predominantly Muslim Rohingyas of Burma. A fringe group called the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (*ARSA*) staged coordinated attacks on the police in

Rakhine state of Myanmar (Al Jazeera, 2022). The army retaliated. It killed 400 armed fighters, but others argue that most of the dead were civilians.

The violence against the Rohingyas escalated. More than 120,000 fled to Bangladesh. Without simplifying the conflict, Harari demonstrates (*through detailed reports*) how Facebook was used as a platform to spread hate messages against Rohingyas, like how radio was used to spread hate messages against the Tutsis of Rwanda in the early 1990s. There were a few Buddhist clerics who were calling for the extermination of Rohingyas, and their messages went viral on Facebook. Instead of the algorithm censoring this as a hate message, it saw it as popular because of the engagements and the number of times it was opened.

Global human rights group Amnesty International was one of the first to call out Meta, the owner of Facebook.

> *In 2017, the Rohingya were killed, tortured, raped, and displaced in the thousands as part of the Myanmar security forces' campaign of ethnic cleansing. In the months and years leading up to the atrocities, Facebook's algorithms were intensifying a storm of hatred against the Rohingya, which contributed to real-world violence.*
> Agnès Callamard, Amnesty International's Secretary General
> Amnesty International, 2022

Some moderate clerics pushed for tolerance and peace. Their messages were not popular, so the algorithm did not push those messages to many in Myanmar. In a nutshell, the algorithm has the power to ensure peace or violence. However, the algorithm's purpose is to maximise engagements (*the number of times you stay on the page*), likes, and downloads. There is limited investment in trying to make sure that the algorithm is trained to tell the truth. It is trained to enhance the profitability of the App by making sure that people remain glued to their screens, as this is what drives advertising revenues. Amnesty further noted that:

> *Meta profits when Facebook users stay on the platform as long as possible, by selling more targeted advertising. The display of inflammatory content – including that which advocates hatred, constituting incitement to violence, hostility, and discrimination, is an effective way of keeping people on the platform longer.*

Facebook is not alone. According to The Guardian (2025), Elon Musk's Grok (*the AI tool affiliated to X*) in mid-May 2025 admitted that it was 'instructed by my (its) creators to accept genocide (in South Africa) as racially motivated'. CNBC, a news channel, weighed in to state that AI chatbots such as Grok can be manipulated by human beings. A new term has emerged to explain the faults of AI: **hallucinations**. These are moments when AI tools fabricate information entirely. (Vanian, 2025). Is that not enough to cause us to worry? There is no consensus yet on what causes these hallucinations. This incident was particularly alarming, as it demonstrates how those same techniques can be deliberately abused to produce misleading or ideologically motivated content (Foulds, Feldman, & Pan, 2025).

Increased Dependency on AI

We are the Google generation. We have coined the term 'to Google' as a synonym for the word search. Many articles have been written based on searching for information on the internet. One can search for articles, videos, books and other forms of information on Google. If the information from a particular source did not appear, it was never Google's fault, but maybe the source's failure to do something called Search Engine Optimisation (SEO).[1] However, that is under threat. First, Google is not the only search engine; there are many others, but it commands more than 90% of web traffic that starts from a search engine (Germain, 2025). People use Google Search five trillion times a year (Argawal & Jain, 2025). Most of the internet-based searches start from Google. In other words, as we write, Google is responsible for what you have access to on the internet and probably more than 25% of the knowledge you have acquired has been found through Google. As already stated, it always looked like a very innocent platform where you would ask a random question like 'what is the best city to live in' and you would get many articles from newspapers, archives, some platforms, etc. But a couple of years ago, Google added what it calls '*AI overview*'. Before you get to other sources related to your search, Google would try to answer your question itself to make it easy for you to save time (I suppose). It was always a small summary, and for me, it looked like it was replacing Wikipedia, which always used to appear at the top.

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[1] We have gone through various rounds of these at our organisation, just to make sure that our information is available across a wide variety of search words used when looking for information. It has worked somewhat.

According to Germain ([2025](#)) of the BBC, Google is about to change how search works. He cites Google's CEO's announcement of what he called the new end-to-end AI search experience, and he emphasised that it is a total reimagining of search. The AI overview was always optional. One can skip it and go to other search results. AI models will be very different. According to various experts, AI modes will replace traditional search altogether; instead, a chatbot will effectively create a miniature article to answer your question. You will lose your ability to carry out more searches and rely on what the AI tool gives you as the most adequate answer. There are concerns that many businesses that rely on Google search will crash. There is also a concern that the truth may be sacrificed. New websites will have to optimise search for the AI chatbot, which will determine what is included or excluded from the answer. Could the era of the open web be overtaken by an all-knowing chatbot AI which determines what we find when we search? How will that affect democratic discourse?

The second argument focuses on the possibility of a decline in our problem-solving skills as humans. The AI Index Report ([2025](#)) posits that, in 2023, researchers observed a dramatic leap in AI performance within just one year. Notably, language model agents demonstrated the ability to outperform humans in specific programming tasks, particularly when working under strict time constraints. This signals a growing efficiency and capability in AI's problem-solving and technical execution compared to its human counterparts.

We have entered an era where machines are getting smarter than humans. For the record, man has been beaten by a machine at chess and at a Chinese game called *Go*. Let me explain a bit. *Go* is one of the oldest and most sophisticated board games in the world, originating in China over 2,500 years ago. It is a strategic game for two players where the goal is to surround more territory than the opponent. It is considered one of the four essential arts of ancient Chinese scholars. It represents strategy balance and discipline, often compared to military tactics. Why does 'Go' matter? It is strongly associated with the meritocracy in China. Yet in October 2015, Google's DeepMind won against the European Go champion Fan Hui 5-0 (Sneed, [2016](#)). In Chess, machines have won several matches against world champions. According to Crystal Springs Uplands School ([2014](#)), this started way back in 1997 when IBM's Deep Blue did something that no machine had done before. It became the first computer system to defeat a reigning world champion. What is worrying is this, whereas Kasparov's 1996 match was against specifically designed hardware that took millions of research and development hours. Today, even low-end mobile devices can defeat the top human players. If these two games are the true test of our intelligence, then we are in deep trouble. We have created something with the potential of becoming smarter

than us, and yet we still believe we can control it. Again, I am not suggesting any conspiracy theories, but if these machines are smart because they have capabilities to learn, and we as humans are devoting more attention to leisure and letting the machines fix the world's problems for us, what will be the eventual outcome?

Are we getting smarter?

It is said that AI has the potential to, or is already, revolutionising various aspects of modern life. Various AI tools, as described above, comprising virtual assistants and recommendation algorithms to complex decision support systems, are meant to improve the quality of lives. But are they making us smarter or dumber? The 2% working in AI-related technology are getting smarter. How about the rest of society? Are our cognitive skills developing and responding to challenges? The increasing reliance on AI for the retrieval of information and decision-making raises questions about how these technologies influence users' critical thinking abilities. Gerlich (2025) argues that,

> *… growing evidence shows that over-reliance on these tools can lead to cognitive offloading.*

This occurs when individuals delegate cognitive tasks to external aids, reducing their engagement in deep, reflective thinking. Gong and Yang (2024) put forward that this may lead to an overall decline in cognitive engagement and skills development. The world has always, up to now, been driven by the humans' quest for better, and as we fixed one set of problems, we moved onto the next—in the process, our cognitive skills kept on improving until now, when we are delegating problems or tasks to tools.

Even before AI, Universities were struggling with increased cases of plagiarism. Many essays were based on cutting and pasting from the internet. AI makes it even worse. Students can ask ChatGPT, Meta, or DeepSeek to create an essay with references, and all this can be done in less than fifteen minutes. Tools like Turnitin (n.d.) are struggling to differentiate between submissions that have been 100% developed by humans or by AI. Adams (2024) surveyed 157 Universities in the UK, and 130 responded. Findings revealed that between 2023 and 2024, there were 7,000 cases of students caught using AI to cheat, 5.1 for every 1,000 students. The previous year, there were just 1.6 cases per 1,000 students. Most of the AI-generated content goes undetected. Findings further highlighted that the University of Reading conducted an experiment

and submitted AI-generated answers through fake student profiles to its professors, but it was not detected. All this poses serious concerns about academic integrity, and considering the scale, it will only get worse. Some universities on the continent require students to submit printed assignments, meaning the marker will simply review the document and, given the sheer number of students, may not have the capacity to cross-check all submissions thoroughly. Besides cheating, the AI era has the potential to reduce the diversity of thought, which is a crucial aspect of building healthy democracies. The diversity of information available on any subject is under threat thanks to algorithms and back-to-back AI searches. Unpopular views risk being eliminated from public discourse. How will the algorithm be governed to ensure that all information on the internet is made available?

AI and the Economy

The discussions on AI have mostly focused on how we are becoming better. AI potentially brings numerous advantages to improve democracy and the economy. Promoters of AI tend to gloss over the challenges or the headwinds ahead. AI brings two main advantages to the economic sector: reduced costs and improved production, especially the provision of unprecedented levels of automation. These advantages mostly favour the entrepreneurial or capital-owning class and not the working class. Loss of jobs to machines can never be something to be celebrated by the working class. However, I am going ahead of myself. First, history has demonstrated that as economies go through new levels of complexity and sophistication via new technology discoveries, they tend to exit less sophisticated markets. They move up the ladder of economic development. Let us start with the Industrial Revolution, *the process or stage of development from an agrarian and handicraft economy to one dominated by industry and machine manufacturing.*

The main features of the Industrial Revolution were technological, socioeconomic, and cultural changes. According to Buchanan (2025), the technological changes included the following: (1) the use of new basic materials, chiefly iron and steel, (2) the use of new energy sources, including both fuels and motive power, such as coal, the steam engine, electricity, petroleum, and the internal-combustion engine, (3) the invention of new machines, such as the spinning jenny and the power loom that permitted increased production with a smaller expenditure of human energy. The spinning jenny was first conceived by James Hargreaves in 1764. This machine made it easier to spin yarn. In 1793, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, which helped clean cotton after it was picked. These and other devices

permitted increased production with a smaller expenditure of human energy. Furthermore, Whitney also came up with the idea of interchangeable parts. Before, a worker would spend a great deal of time making a single product by hand. Whitney discovered that a machine could make many copies of the individual parts of a product at once. Any worker could then assemble the parts. This meant that many goods could be produced quickly. Large factories were being established initially in England and eventually across Europe.

Over time, financial surpluses made from taking the leap earlier than others tended to be invested in the next level of development, usually referred to as the post-industrial age. This phase was characterised by a shift from a manufacturing-based economy to one focused on services, information, and knowledge. Towards the end of the twentieth century, several countries that had developed through industrialisation were exiting or reducing their dependency on manufacturing, moving into services and technology-based innovations. This happened for several reasons, but mostly the increasing competition and growing scarcity of cheap labour, which is critical for success in lower-end manufacturing. As countries benefit from early manufacturing, they invest in the education of the next generation, and in a matter of decades, will have a very sophisticated workforce that cannot be satisfied with low-wage manufacturing opportunities. Late industrialisers like China, India, Indonesia, and Malaysia (to a limited extent) took advantage of this shift in focus and invested heavily in manufacturing, especially clothing. From the late 1980s, China and others have played the role of manufacturing clothing apparel and other low-technology goods for the rest of the world. Today, the tide has turned. These countries have also gone through their full cycle of manufacturing maturity. Skills have vastly improved, and the numbers available to work in large-scale clothing manufacturing are on the decline, especially in China. The assumption amongst those of us interested in patterns was that the manufacturing of clothing would then move to Africa, given the abundance of unskilled labour and natural resources. There have been attempts at this for a bit, but it is not happening at the pace we assumed. First, manufacturing is not going to African countries but is staying within China, and some of it is being moved to neighbouring countries. More importantly, China is leveraging to cope with a growing shortage of manpower.

Enter AI-Powered Robots

The lower end of manufacturing (especially of clothing apparel) in the past attracted large numbers of unskilled workers, hence the unending transfer of manufacturing sites from the more developed regions to other regions. The AI revolution suggests that this pattern could be over.

According to The Economist (2025), humanoid robots are beginning to leave the lab and enter the workplace. Many companies have pivoted; they have replaced human labour with humanoid robots in the production process. According to the Vogue Fashion Institute (2025), the use of robotics in garment manufacturing has increased tenfold in recent years, and it contributes to high-volume manufacturing. They carry out the following tasks: fabric testing, fabric cutting, sewing, material handling and sorting, 3D knitting, and packaging with better precision and speed than humans. The growth of humanoids is not isolated to China or the clothing industry alone. Tesla, a company owned by Elon Musk, expects to churn out 1 million Optimuses (humanoid robots) by 2030 or even by 2029. These robots are expected to generate close to US$10 trillion in annual sales for Tesla. Goldman Sachs forecasts that within a decade, the market for humanoid robots could be worth US$200 billion. The estimates are that there will be 3 billion humanoids by 2060, one for every three people (Bank of America Institute, 2025).

Back to the clothing industry. It goes beyond improved manufacturing capabilities to innovative use of data, digital platforms, and systems in planning production, understanding customer needs, and developing a more targeted sales strategy. For instance, the most downloaded shopping app in the US is not Amazon but a Chinese one called Shein. It has managed to launch more than 150,000 new items in one year alone, and this was about ten times more than what Zara pushed (Calabrese & Tu, 2025). The production capabilities also lead to price competitiveness. The average price for women's clothing on Shein was less than US$16 compared to Zara's US$48. How can African-based producers compete against such low prices? Existing production capacities across Africa have yet to leverage data for production planning in ways that Shein does, nor have they invested in humanoids.

How About Africa's Labour Surplus?

We have always prided ourselves as the youngest continent in terms of the demographic distribution in our countries. The assumption was, some production of less complex products, such as clothing apparel, would naturally shift to Africa given our youth dividend and abundant natural resources. The second assumption has always been around the normalisation of immigration from Africa to more developed regions to fill the labour gap. However, that also may become unviable. Most low-skilled jobs, such as driving, delivery, and cleaning, are being automated. It is expected that the number of AI-powered and driverless vehicles will increase in the taxi and delivery space.

For instance, Amazon is already delivering packages using drones. Waymo (2025) has already tested and deployed driverless cars that one can order just like one would order an Uber ride. Several jobs are going to be lost thanks to these innovations.

Conclusion

It is important to consider the environment or context in which AI is evolving. We are living through a moment of values-based polarisation and increasing intolerance toward opposing views. Can AI be trusted to judiciously manage diverse perspectives and allow users to form judgments based on the information available? I have already referred to X's Grok, which admitted to being programmed with the assertion that genocide is occurring in South Africa.

What might happen during cliffhanger elections? Would the owners of an algorithm be tempted to interfere to ensure that one side prevails? How will controversial subjects be discussed in public spaces, such as the internet and chat forums? Will AI seek to influence or tilt the balance of discourse? Let us add another dimension: how will these profit-driven AI tools reconcile the pursuit of financial returns with the responsibility to provide balanced and impartial information? Have we capitulated too soon to a new form of existence where machines begin to assume godlike influence? There is a real danger that these seemingly ordinary tools of convenience can be manipulated for ideological purposes. According to the BBC News (2014), Stephen Hawking issued a sobering warning:

> *A super intelligent AI will be extremely good at accomplishing its goals, and if those goals are not aligned with ours, we are in trouble.*

Have we already arrived at that moment of trouble?

Available evidence suggests that AI is about to lead to the creation of new production and distribution efficiencies. However, Africa as a region is yet to meaningfully embrace and harness the strengths that AI presents. The continent is yet to meaningfully invest adequately in an enabling ecosystem for an AI-led transformation. The discussion above has highlighted the extent to which AI-led disruptions in other regions may actually cause harm to Africa. The continent has not moved at the same pace as others in terms of embracing technological changes.

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