

Expert Foresight on AI-Driven Disinformation: Findings from the ATHENA Mini-Delphi Study

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Abstract: *The 2024 “super election year” demonstrated both the promise and risks of artificial intelligence (AI) in democratic processes. Innovative uses, such as AI-powered fact-checking and voter engagement tools, contrasted with harmful applications including deepfakes. Although the overall impact of deepfakes and other AI-generated disinformation was lower than anticipated, experts predict a substantial rise in AI-powered disinformation in the short term, particularly through synthetic media and foreign influence operations. Evidence of AI-enabled manipulation highlights the need for effective regulation and strengthened oversight to safeguard information integrity in a rapidly changing information ecosystem.*

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence and Democracy; Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI); Disinformation; Misinformation; Delphi Study

In 2024, more than half of the world’s population voted in more than sixty elections. The breadth of Artificial Intelligence (AI) use cases during this “super election year” demonstrated the technology’s potential to disrupt electoral processes—both positively and negatively.

Uses such as AI-powered preliminary fact-checking (Corney, Wilkinson, and Cann 2024) and an AI avatar collecting voters’ ideas to generate public-policy proposals (Grierson 2024) showcased AI’s innovative potential, while disinformation deepfakes that attributed false statements to political figures and deepfake nudes amplified gendered political violence (Schneier and Sanders 2024). For some countries, 2024 marked the first elections in which generative AI was readily available. The anticipated scale of impact from disinformation deepfakes, however, was widely considered to have been overestimated by the end of last year (Barr 2025; Schneier and Sanders 2024).

Nevertheless, in the medium term, AI applications are expected to be the most impactful emerging technology to disinformation, as revealed by a recent Delphi study by the ATHENA project (Cavalcante and Wright 2025). Twenty-seven experts were surveyed on their views on the evolution of disinformation in the next three to five years, with the vast majority predicting a significant surge in disinformation content: 88% of respondents estimated an increase of between 100% and 1000%. When asked to rank the expected impact of eight emerging technologies, experts predicted a prevalence of generative-AI-fuelled disinformation; they identified deepfakes/synthetic media and LLMs as likely to play a significant role in disrupting the information space. Among the expected impacts of these emerging technologies, respondents

most often mentioned the amplification of foreign influence operations capable of destabilising countries.

While evidence on the extent of harm caused by AI-generated disinformation remains limited—as illustrated by the fake audio incident during the 2023 Slovakian elections (De Nada and Peter Jančárik 2024)—AI nevertheless presents a significant threat to information integrity more broadly (EDMO 2025). As the technology redefines online information-seeking, malicious uses — such as poisoning by foreign actors (Sadeghi and Blachez 2025)— weaken the information ecosystem and deepen the trust crisis.

While some experts advocated for stricter rules, others emphasised the need for measures that counter disinformation without compromising freedom of expression. This balanced approach is materialised in the European Democracy Shield (EUDS), the EU’s recent initiative that outlines strategies and measures to tackle disinformation and FIMI across three axes. A notable strength of the EUDS that it mobilises a broad range of stakeholders, from fact-checkers and civil society organisations to VLOPs and VLOSEs¹. Among the various actions the EUDS proposes, strengthening the co-regulatory framework, embodied in the Code of Conduct on Disinformation, stands out as one of the most difficult tasks ahead, given its reliance on voluntary commitments. While the EUDS states that the European Commission will assess the level of commitment of its signatories, establish dialogues with follow-up actions, and pursue more concrete efforts on issues such as recommender-system transparency and the demonetisation of disinformation (European Commission 2025), previous research has shown how performative the commitment reports submitted by VLOPs and VLOSEs can be (Borz et al. 2024; Münges and Park 2024). If the challenges that AI poses to FIMI and disinformation are to be effectively addressed, robust EU oversight of this co-regulatory approach will be essential.

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¹ VLOPs and VLOSEs are acronyms introduced in the European Union’s Digital Services Act (DSA) and refer to Very Large Online Platforms and Very Large Online Search Engines, respectively. These designations apply to services with more than 45 million monthly active users in the EU, placing them under the DSA’s most stringent obligations—such as systemic risk assessments, enhanced content moderation duties, independent audits, and increased transparency requirements.

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