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AI-powered record management for transitional justice: Advancing transparency and accountability in post-conflict societies

Akeem Aderayo Saraki [1], Vaithiyalingam Subramanian Manjula[2], Emmanuel Inah Mkpe [3], Mukandayisenga Allen [4], Chukwuemeka Odi Agwu [5], Habib Shehu[6]

[1] Department of Social Justice and Security Studies, Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria
[2]Professor, Department of Computer Science, Kampala International University, Kampala, Uganda, East Africa, manjuisne2015@gmail.com . manjula.subramanian@kiu.ac.ug, Orcid ID: (0000-0003-0308-3289)
[4,5,6] Department of Information Technology, Kampala International University, Kampala, Uganda
[3] Department of Political & Administrative Studies, Kampala International University, Kampala, Uganda
[5] Department of Computer Science, Kampala International University, Kampala, Uganda
*habib.shehu@studmc.kiu.ac.ug

Abstract

This study examines the transformative potential and ethical risks of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-powered Electronic Records Management (ERM) systems in advancing transparency and accountability within transitional justice processes in post-conflict societies. Drawing on a qualitative comparative case study of Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and South Africa, the research investigates how AI technologies, including natural language processing, automated classification, and intelligent declassification, can enhance the accessibility, authenticity, and usability of truth commission archives and judicial records. Findings reveal four key opportunities: efficient processing of unstructured testimonial data, transparent declassification of sensitive materials, victim-centered reparations through automated claim validation, and preservation of collective memory via multilingual digital curation. However, these benefits are counterbalanced by significant context-dependent risks: algorithmic bias reinforcing dominant political narratives (particularly in Rwanda), digital exclusion marginalizing rural populations (especially in Sierra Leone), and surveillance weaponization threatening survivor safety. The study proposes a rights-based framework grounded in six principles, transparency, privacy, inclusivity, accountability, ethical design, and sustainability, to guide responsible AI deployment. This framework positions technology not as a neutral solution but as a socially embedded tool requiring participatory governance, independent oversight, and alignment with human rights norms. The research contributes empirical insights for policymakers, archivists, and peacebuilders seeking to harness AI for justice while safeguarding against its potential to reproduce inequalities in fragile contexts.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), Electronic Records Management (ERM), Transitional justice, Post-conflict peacebuilding, Data ethics, Rights-based framework

1. Introduction

Transitional justice addresses legacies of violence and human rights abuses through mechanisms like truth commissions, reparations, and institutional reforms to restore state-citizen trust (Teitel, 2000; Skaar et al.,

2016). Central to these processes are records, critical instruments for truth-telling, memory, and accountability whose integrity shapes transitional justice credibility (Harris, 2019). Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers transformative potential for electronic records management (ERM) by automating classification, declassification, and dissemination of vast archival data, thereby enhancing transparency and civic engagement in fragile contexts (Wheatley & Tredinnick, 2021). Yet AI integration raises significant ethical concerns: algorithmic bias may privilege dominant narratives, surveillance capabilities could re-traumatize survivors, and digital exclusion risks marginalizing vulnerable populations (Benjamin, 2019; Olorunnisola & Martin, 2020). This paper examines AI-powered ERM's dual capacity to advance or undermine transitional justice in African post-conflict societies, advocating for rights-based frameworks that balance technological innovation with justice, dignity, and inclusive governance.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Transitional Justice and Records

Transitional justice (TJ) encompasses judicial and non-judicial measures—including truth commissions, reparations, institutional reforms, and prosecutions—deployed by societies emerging from conflict or authoritarianism to redress human rights violations (Teitel, 2000; Skaar et al., 2016). Central to these mechanisms is records management: archives provide evidentiary foundations for accountability, memorialize victim experiences, and enable institutional reform (Harris, 2019). Truth commissions in South Africa, Sierra Leone, and Liberia relied extensively on documentary and testimonial records to reconstruct violent histories and foster collective memory (Hayner, 2011). Yet records remain contested terrain—simultaneously empowering victims' claims and historical truth (McEvoy, 2007), while vulnerable to state secrecy, destruction, and manipulation (Ketelaar, 2002). The credibility of TJ thus hinges on how records are preserved, classified, and made accessible, demanding robust technological solutions for managing sensitive data.

2.2 Electronic Records Management in Post-Conflict Settings

Electronic Records Management (ERM) enhances governance transparency through digitization, classification, and secure preservation of state information (Shepherd & Yeo, 2003). In post-conflict contexts, ERM supports institutional reconstruction by mitigating risks of record loss, forgery, and selective disclosure (Ngoepe, 2016), while facilitating citizen access to strengthen democratic participation (Upward, 2005). African experiences reveal mixed outcomes: Rwanda's digitized genocide archives improved access to testimonies yet sparked ownership disputes (Thompson, 2013), while Sierra Leone's TRC digital repositories face underfunding and technological obsolescence despite supporting reconciliation (Schabas, 2004). These cases underscore that ERM's efficacy depends on integration with broader TJ and governance reforms.

2.3 AI in Records Management

Artificial Intelligence transforms records management through natural language processing, automated classification, and intelligent information retrieval (Russell & Norvig, 2020). AI enhances archival searchability, detects patterns across massive datasets, and automates declassification or anonymization of sensitive materials (Wheatley & Tredinnick, 2021; Nyauma & Manjula, 2023). It also bolsters digital forensics by verifying authenticity and strengthening evidentiary integrity (Duranti, 2019). For TJ contexts burdened by millions of documents and testimonies, AI-driven tools can categorize victim narratives, identify violence patterns, and cross-reference perpetrator actions, alleviating resource

constraints while improving transparency (Mhlambi, 2020).

2.4 Opportunities and Risks

AI offers four key opportunities for TJ: (1) efficient classification of unstructured archival data through text mining (Gill, 2019); (2) transparent declassification reducing politically motivated secrecy (Wheatley & Tredinnick, 2021); (3) victim-centered reparations through automated claim validation (Mhlambi, 2020); and (4) memory preservation via accessible digital curation (Harris, 2019). However, significant risks persist. Algorithmic bias may reproduce inequalities by privileging dominant narratives (Benjamin, 2019). Digital exclusion marginalizes populations lacking infrastructure access (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2020). State surveillance and data manipulation threaten to weaponize archives for repression (Zuboff, 2019), while cyber vulnerabilities endanger victim privacy (Duranti, 2019). Without participatory governance, AI may perpetuate neo-colonial power asymmetries in archival control (Ketelaar, 2002; Mhlambi, 2020).

2.5 Toward a Rights-Based Framework and Research Gaps

Scholars advocate rights-based AI deployment guided by transparency, accountability, non-discrimination, and inclusivity (UNESCO, 2021). Meaningful stakeholder participation, victims, civil society, archivists, technologists, is essential for contextually appropriate design (Gill, 2019). Robust regulatory frameworks, including data protection laws and independent oversight, can mitigate misuse risks (Crawford & Calo, 2016). African Union digital governance initiatives offer regional foundations for rights-aligned AI integration (AU, 2020). Critical gaps remain: few studies systematically examine AI-powered ERM within TJ contexts, African perspectives are underrepresented despite the continent's rich TJ experience, and empirical research on community perceptions of AI systems is scarce (Harris, 2019; Hayner, 2011). This study addresses these gaps through African case analyses that balance technological potential with ethical imperatives in fragile settings.

3. Methodological Triangulation

The study's research design employed methodological triangulation to ensure robust cross-case comparability. Figure 1 visualizes the distribution of data sources and the composition of the interview participant pool.

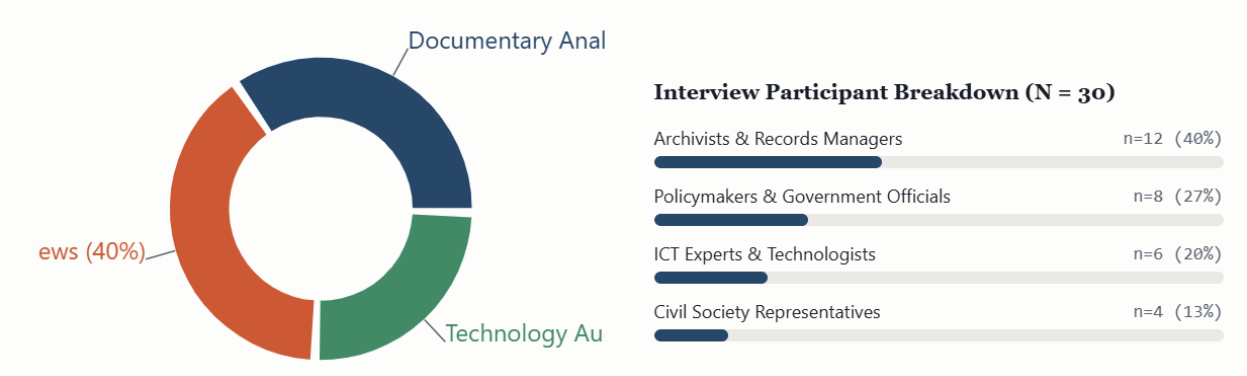

Figure 1. Methodological Triangulation for Data Sources and Participant Distribution

Source: Research design framework following Yin (2018) and Braun & Clarke (2006). Participant recruitment through purposive and snowball sampling.

The study's methodological design employed triangulation across three complementary data sources to enhance validity and cross-case comparability (Yin, 2018). Semi-structured interviews constituted the primary data source (40% of analytical weight), with 30

participants distributed across the three countries. Archivists and records managers formed the largest participant group (40%, n=12), providing ground-level insights into archival challenges and AI feasibility. Documentary analysis (35%) encompassed TRC reports, judicial records, policy documents, and existing digital repositories, contextualizing interview findings within institutional and historical frameworks. Technology audits (25%) provided empirical assessments of current archival systems, digital infrastructure, and AI tool functionality. This triangulation strategy was critical for addressing restricted archival access in Rwanda and technological flux in AI development, enabling the study to cross-validate findings and produce robust, contextually grounded recommendations.

4. Results of Case Analysis and Cross-Case Findings

The following figures present findings from the comparative multiple case study analysis of Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and South Africa. Results are organized around three analytical axes: (1) the current state of transitional justice archives and their readiness for AI integration; (2) thematic patterns emerging from stakeholder interviews; and (3) the opportunities-risks duality of AI-powered electronic records management. Together, these findings inform a proposed rights-based framework for ethical AI deployment in post-conflict archival contexts.

4.1 Comparative Archival Landscape

The three case study countries represent distinct transitional justice trajectories with divergent archival outcomes. Table 1 provides a structured comparison across seven analytical dimensions, establishing baseline conditions for assessing AI-powered ERM feasibility.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Transitional Justice Mechanisms and Archival Status Across Case Studies

Country	TJ Mechanism	Archive Scale	Digitization	AI Readiness	Key Challenge	Archive Type
Rwanda	Gacaca Courts / ICTR	1.9M+ case files	Partial	Moderate	State narrative control	Testimonial & judicial
Sierra Leone	TRC + Special Court	Thousands of testimonies	Minimal	Low	Infrastructure & funding	Testimonial & legal
South Africa	National TRC	21,000+ victim statements	Moderate	Moderate–High	Fragmentation & politics	Testimonial & security files

Source: Compiled from documentary analysis of TRC reports, judicial archives, and technology audit findings (2023–2024).

This table above presents a structured comparison of the three case study countries along six analytical dimensions derived from documentary analysis and technology audits. Rwanda's Gacaca courts generated the largest archival corpus (1.9 million+ files), yet digitization remains partial and state control over archives restricts independent access (Thompson, 2013; Longman, 2017). Sierra Leone's TRC archives, while rich in testimonial content, suffer from minimal digitization and infrastructural deficits that severely constrain AI readiness (Schabas, 2004; Kelsall, 2009). South Africa occupies a middle position: its TRC collected over 21,000 statements with moderate digitization efforts, but records remain fragmented across institutions and politically contested (Harris, 2019; Posel & Simpson, 2002). These baseline conditions fundamentally shape the feasibility and risks of AI-powered ERM deployment in each context.

4.2 Stakeholder Perspectives of Thematic Distribution

Thematic analysis of interview data using NVivo revealed six core themes with significant cross-case variation. The frequency distribution of coded references, presented in

Figure 1, illuminates how political context, infrastructural capacity, and justice legacies shape stakeholder perceptions of AI integration.

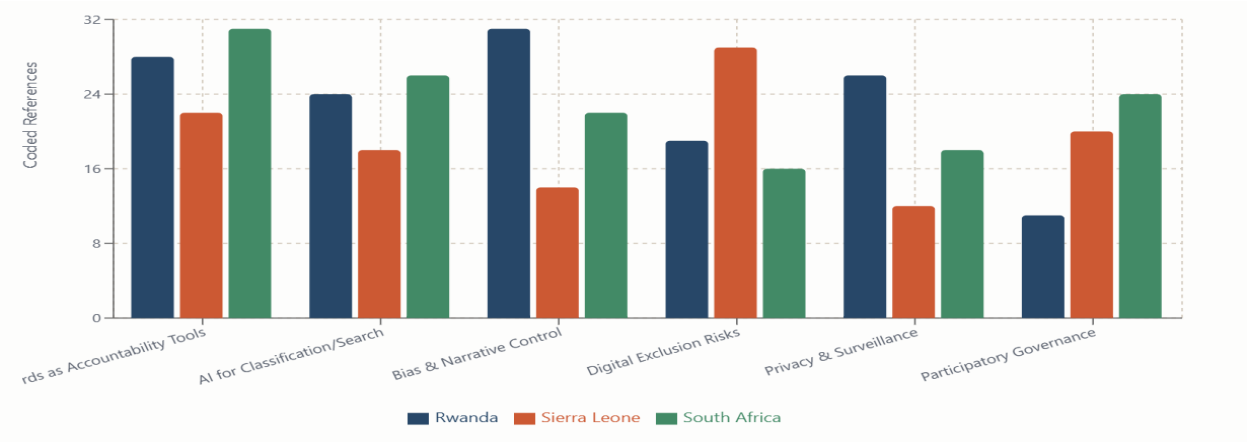

Figure 2. Thematic Distribution of Interview Responses Across Case Study Countries (N = 30)

Source: Thematic coding via NVivo of 30 semi-structured interviews conducted across the three case study sites (2023–2024).

Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with archivists, policymakers, and ICT experts reveals divergent concerns across cases. Rwandan respondents most frequently referenced bias and narrative control risks (31 coded references), reflecting anxieties about state manipulation of archives in an authoritarian context (Reyntjens, 2021). Sierra Leonean participants disproportionately raised digital exclusion concerns (29 references), consistent with the country's fragile infrastructure (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2020). South African interviewees emphasized records as accountability tools (31 references) and participatory governance (24 references), aligning with the TRC's restorative justice legacy and ongoing demands for archival democratization (Harris, 2019). Privacy and surveillance concerns were most prominent in Rwanda (26 references), underscoring the tension between AI's analytical power and its potential weaponization. These patterns confirm that AI deployment risks are context-dependent, shaped by political regimes, infrastructural capacity, and justice legacies.

4.3 AI Readiness Assessment

Technology audits across the three countries generated multi-dimensional readiness profiles. Figure 3 presents a radar visualization comparing six critical dimensions for AI-powered ERM deployment, revealing significant disparities conditioned by governance structures and institutional capacity.

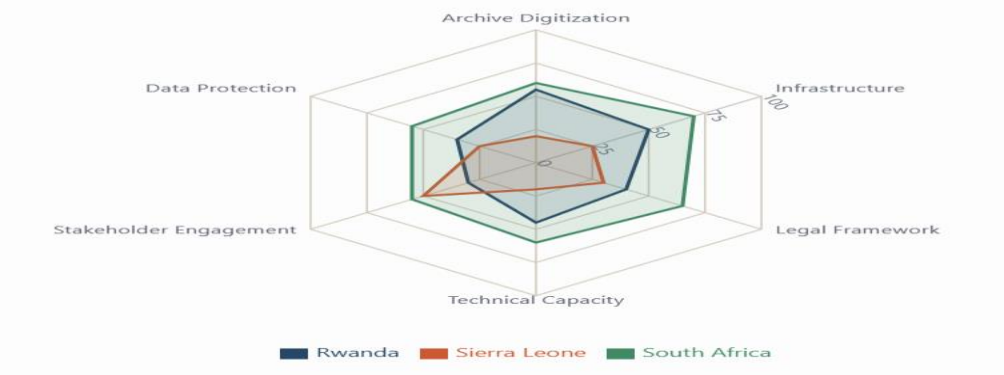

Figure 3. AI Readiness Assessment for Transitional Justice Archives: Multi-Dimensional Comparison

Source: Composite scores derived from technology audits, policy document analysis, and expert interview assessments (2023–2024). Scores normalized to 0–100 scale.

This radar visualization synthesizes technology audit findings across six dimensions critical for AI-powered ERM deployment. South Africa demonstrates the highest overall readiness, scoring strongly on infrastructure (70/100), legal frameworks (65/100), and archive digitization (60/100), supported by institutions like Wits University's digitized TRC collection and relatively robust data protection legislation (Harris, 2019). Rwanda shows moderate technical capacity (45/100) and archive digitization (55/100) but scores lowest on stakeholder engagement (30/100) and data protection (35/100), reflecting centralized governance structures that limit participatory oversight (Longman, 2017). Sierra Leone's profile reveals critical deficits across all dimensions, with infrastructure (25/100) and technical capacity (20/100) presenting the most acute barriers to AI adoption (Kelsall, 2009). These scores indicate that AI readiness is not merely a technological question but is deeply conditioned by governance structures, legal environments, and the degree to which civil society can meaningfully participate in archival processes.

4.4 Opportunities and Risks of AI-Powered ERM

Cross-case analysis identified four principal opportunities and five significant risks associated with AI-powered ERM in transitional justice. Table 2 maps these findings, revealing an asymmetry between universal opportunities and context-dependent risks.

Table 2. AI Opportunities and Risks Matrix for Transitional Justice Archives

Category	Code	Title	Description	Countries Involved	Risk Level
Opportunity	O1	Automated Classification	NLP-driven categorization of unstructured testimonial and judicial archives	Rwanda; Sierra Leone; South Africa	—
Opportunity	O2	Transparent Declassification	Algorithmic identification of records eligible for public release	Rwanda; South Africa	—
Opportunity	O3	Victim-Centered Reparations	Automated claim validation and pattern-matching for reparations eligibility	Sierra Leone; South Africa	—
Opportunity	O4	Memory Preservation	Digital curation with multilingual access and advanced searchability	Rwanda; Sierra Leone; South Africa	—

Risk	R1	Algorithmic Bias	Reinforcement of dominant political narratives in classification outputs	Rwanda; South Africa	High
Risk	R2	Digital Exclusion	Marginalization of rural and under-resourced communities from digital archives	Sierra Leone; Rwanda	High
Risk	R3	Surveillance Weaponization	State repurposing of AI-analyzed archives for political repression	Rwanda	Critical
Risk	R4	Privacy Violations	Cyber vulnerabilities exposing sensitive survivor testimonies	Sierra Leone; South Africa	Medium
Risk	R5	Narrative Reductionism	Algorithmic flattening of complex testimonies into rigid data categories	Sierra Leone; South Africa	Medium

Note. NLP = Natural Language Processing. "Risk Level" applies only to identified risks
Source: Synthesized from documentary analysis, interview data, and technology audit findings across all three case studies.

This matrix maps the four primary opportunities and five principal risks of AI-powered ERM identified through cross-case analysis. Opportunities are universal in scope, all three countries could benefit from automated classification (O1) and memory preservation (O4), while specific opportunities like transparent declassification (O2) are most relevant to contexts with classified security files (Rwanda, South Africa). Risks, however, are highly context-dependent: surveillance weaponization (R3) was identified as a critical concern only in Rwanda, where authoritarian governance structures could repurpose AI-analyzed archives for political control (Reyntjens, 2021; Zuboff, 2019). Algorithmic bias (R1) emerged as a high-severity risk in both Rwanda and South Africa, where politically contested narratives make classification outputs particularly sensitive (Benjamin, 2019). Digital exclusion (R2) disproportionately affects Sierra Leone and rural Rwanda, where infrastructural deficits compound existing inequalities (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2020). This asymmetry between universal opportunities and context-specific risks underscores the necessity of tailored, participatory deployment frameworks.

4.5 Toward a Rights-Based Framework

Synthesizing findings from the case analyses, stakeholder interviews, and technology audits, this study proposes a rights-based framework comprising six guiding principles for the ethical deployment of AI-powered ERM in transitional justice contexts. Figure 5 articulates each principle with its operational implications.

Table 3. Proposed Rights-Based Framework for AI-Powered Electronic Records Management in Transitional Justice

Principle No.	Principle	Description
1	Transparency	Open algorithms, explainable outputs, and public documentation of AI decision-making processes in archival classification and declassification.
2	Privacy	Privacy-by-design architecture incorporating automated anonymization, differential privacy mechanisms, and end-to-end encryption of survivor testimonies.
3	Inclusivity	Multilingual interfaces, hybrid digital–offline access models, and community-based archival programs to ensure equitable participation.
4	Accountability	Independent oversight bodies composed of archivists, human rights experts, and survivor representatives to monitor AI systems.
5	Ethical Design	Participatory co-design with survivors and affected communities, systematic bias auditing, and context-sensitive cultural adaptation.

6	Sustainability	Adoption of open standards, interoperable formats, long-term digital preservation strategies, and local capacity building to prevent donor dependency.

Source: Author's synthesis based on case study findings, stakeholder interviews, and alignment with UNESCO (2021) AI ethics recommendations and AU (2020) Digital Transformation Strategy.

This framework above synthesizes findings from all three case studies into six guiding principles for ethical AI deployment in transitional justice archives. The framework responds directly to empirical observations: Transparency addresses Rwanda's restricted archive access; Privacy responds to surveillance risks identified across all cases; Inclusivity counters Sierra Leone's digital exclusion challenges; Accountability operationalizes South Africa's demands for archival democratization; Ethical Design ensures context-sensitivity highlighted by interviewees; and Sustainability addresses the technological obsolescence threatening Sierra Leone's repositories (Schabas, 2004; UNESCO, 2021). Each principle is grounded in international norms (UNESCO, 2021; AU, 2020) and validated through stakeholder perspectives gathered during fieldwork. The framework positions AI not as a neutral technical solution but as a socially embedded tool whose governance must be explicitly designed to serve justice, dignity, and inclusive memory-making.

4.6 Key Findings

i. AI-powered ERM offers transformative potential for transitional justice archives through automated classification, transparent declassification, and enhanced searchability, but technological capabilities do not automatically translate into justice outcomes.

ii. Risks are profoundly context-dependent: algorithmic bias and surveillance weaponization are most acute in authoritarian settings (Rwanda), while digital exclusion disproportionately affects fragile states (Sierra Leone).

iii. AI readiness varies dramatically across cases, with South Africa best positioned for integration, followed by Rwanda and Sierra Leone, shaped by infrastructure, legal frameworks, and stakeholder engagement.

iv. A rights-based framework grounded in transparency, privacy, inclusivity, accountability, ethical design, and sustainability is essential for responsible AI deployment in post-conflict archival contexts.

5. Discussion of Findings

Records function as repositories of memory, instruments of accountability, and foundations for reform, but archives in all three cases remain underutilized, poorly preserved, or politicized. AI-powered ERM could transform transitional justice through efficient categorization, pattern detection in testimonies, and enhanced accessibility. Yet technology alone cannot guarantee justice. Rwanda's centralized archives risk manipulation without independent oversight; Sierra Leone's weak data protection frameworks endanger vulnerable individuals; South Africa's fragmented records require normative commitments to inclusivity beyond technical fixes. These cases affirm that AI integration must be guided by rights-based principles prioritizing survivor dignity, transparency, accountability, and equitable access, aligning technological innovation with justice imperatives rather than treating it as a neutral solution.

6.PolicyImplicationsand Recommendations

Governments must treat archives as public goods, mandating digital preservation with embedded privacy safeguards and resisting political centralization of records. International organizations should establish global ethical guidelines for AI in transitional justice and facilitate cross-country knowledge exchange. Civil society must advocate for participatory AI design with survivor involvement and support community-based archival initiatives to ensure pluralistic memory-making. Archivists and technologists should co-develop context-sensitive, open-source tools with privacy-by-

design features, automated anonymization, multilingual interfaces, and hybrid dissemination strategies combining digital platforms with offline access. Crucially, independent oversight bodies comprising archivists, human rights experts, and survivor representatives must monitor AI systems to prevent misuse. Long-term digital preservation through interoperable formats and open standards is essential to prevent obsolescence and safeguard intergenerational memory.

7. Conclusion

AI-powered ERM holds transformative potential for transitional justice by enhancing transparency, accessibility, and analytical capacity in managing vast archival datasets. NLP, machine learning, and automated declassification could strengthen truth recovery and restorative justice. Yet algorithmic bias, surveillance risks, and digital exclusion threaten to reproduce injustices if AI is deployed without robust safeguards. This study proposes a rights-based framework grounded in six principles: transparency, privacy, inclusivity, accountability, ethical design, and sustainability. Technology must serve justice, not vice versa. Future research should pilot AI-ERM tools in emerging post-conflict contexts, investigate community perceptions of algorithmic archives, and develop interdisciplinary methodologies bridging peace studies, archival science, and AI ethics. Ultimately, AI-powered ERM is not a technological fix but, when responsibly implemented within a rights-based framework, a powerful instrument for amplifying silenced voices, safeguarding memory, and reinforcing accountability in societies rebuilding from conflict.

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