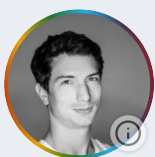


For politicians, TikTok's algorithm is a handy bogeyman

by [Dr. Nicolas Kayser-Bril](#)

A parliamentary report about TikTok has received lots of media attention in France in the last few weeks. It is interesting in its own right, and it's also a prime example of how many European politicians behave when faced with an issue related to algorithms.

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Last month, a group of French Members of Parliament released a [report](#) on the effects of TikTok on the mental health of minors. They interviewed over 150 experts and persons affected, including TikTok executives. They ran an online survey and collected over 33,000 responses. The testimonies were published in full in a [1,000-page PDF](#) and the survey

responses are freely available in a [33 Mb CSV file](#). This wealth of material will no doubt make the joy of many Master's students currently looking for a dissertation topic.

Some of the MPs' analysis is spot on. They complain of the very limited application of European regulations such as the GDPR and the DSA, and call for more resources for trusted flaggers (organizations that have a direct contact to platforms to signal inappropriate content). They also wish for an open standard for recommendation algorithms so that third-parties be able to design specific "For You" feeds. Users could then browse "TikTok curated by ARTE," for instance.

But the bulk of the report is spotty. MPs talk of "the" TikTok algorithm as a Holy Grail that must be deciphered. Much room is devoted to proving that TikTok *causes* mental trouble. Although academics are careful to stress that high TikTok usage *correlates* with anxiety and depression, the authors did not hesitate claim that TikTok "provokes" and "amplifies" mental health disorders.

Throughout the report, TikTok is vilified as "a poison," "a trap" or "an outlaw." It is "one of the worst social networks," the authors claim, which offers content that is "mostly harmful." Never do they back up these claims seriously.

Lost girls

Instead, they make TikTok solely responsible for self-harm, anorexia and violence. If we were to believe them, a perfidious Chinese actor is bent on perverting France's youth.

This oversimplification is not new. The trope of the nefarious Other preying on young girls is as old as modernity. Novels, drugs or video games were the TikTok of their days. Then as now, "inappropriate parental behavior" should be punished, "our values" should be preserved and young people should "educate and entertain themselves," but only in the way older people tell them to.

The shallowness of the report is in part due to the nature of French institutions. Many MPs are inexperienced due to the constant political instability and the parliament has so little power that they often resort to using parliamentary investigations as a stage on which they try to make it to the national media.

But looking at the authors' posts on X, Instagram and LinkedIn, I can't help but wonder: Did they – perhaps unconsciously – indulge in intellectual laziness and caricature just to be able to produce sleek 30-second clips where they excoriate TikTok? Did they fall prey to the short attention spans and emotionalization they denounce? We will never know, because the French parliament hasn't, and likely won't, commission a report on the effects of Facebook on boomers, or of X's algorithm on politicians.

This is an excerpt from the *Automated Society* newsletter, a bi-weekly round up of news in automated decision-making in Europe. [Subscribe here](#).