



Opening statement to the Oireachtas Committee on Children, Disability, Equality and Integration on the protection of children in the use of A.I.

13 February 2024

1. We are grateful to the Committee for the opportunity to contribute to its deliberations.
2. Artificial intelligence is not a future technology. TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram use it to shape the world that our children see through their platforms every day. Their A.I. builds a tailored diet of content and puts it in each child's feed. This A.I. is known as a "Recommender System".
3. Recommender systems feed each person a personalised diet of content estimated to provoke or outrage them specifically. This keeps the person on the platform longer, increasing advertising opportunities.
4. Here are examples of how this A.I. artificially distorts the world for our children.
 - The U.N. said Meta played a "determining role" in Myanmar's 2017 genocide.¹ This month, lawyers for Rohingya refugees put the blame on Facebook's recommender system, which they said "magnified hate speech through its algorithm".²
 - Nearly three quarters of problematic³ YouTube content seen by more than thirty seven thousand test volunteers came from YouTube's own recommender system amplifying it.⁴
 - Investigation by the Anti-Defamation League showed that Facebook, Instagram, and X late last year are filling 14-year-old test users' feeds with hate and conspiracy.⁵
 - Investigation by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue found that YouTube's recommender system routinely pushes extremely misogynistic hateful material to boys.⁶
 - Uplift shared a story from a member about recommender systems. I will read two lines:
 "My beautiful, intelligent, accomplished niece was encouraged, incited to see suicide as a romantic way to end her life. She did end it."
 - Investigation by Amnesty International revealed how this happens. Just one hour after their researchers started a TikTok account posing as a 13-year-old child who views mental health content, TikTok's A.I. started to show the child videos glamourising suicide.⁷

5. This recommender system A.I. manipulates and addicts our children. It promotes hurt, hate, self-loathing, and suicide.

What can be done?

6. The first step is to acknowledge that we cannot put our faith in voluntary action by tech corporations. This is overdue. Technology corporations have a very poor record of self-improvement and responsible behaviour even when they know their technology is harmful,⁸ and even when lives are at stake.⁹
7. Tech corporations will not save our children. We must stare this problem in the face, and take up the tools to solve it.
8. Coimisiún na Meán's forthcoming binding Code for video platforms¹⁰ is anticipated to introduce a rule that recommender systems based on profiling must be off by default until a person makes the decision to switch them on.¹¹
9. We and more than sixty organisations across Ireland have written to urge Coimisiún na Meán to proceed, and to go farther: make the rule inescapably binding.¹²
10. 82% of the Irish public support a binding rule that profile-based recommender systems must be off by default, according to polling by Ireland Thinks.¹³ That overwhelming support crossed divisions of age, education, and income.
11. There is overwhelming international support, too. In Brussels, a cross-party group of MEPs has formally written to the European Commission, urging it to apply Coimisiún na Meán's example as binding rules across the EU.¹⁴ U.S. Federal Trade Commissioner Bedoya himself took to Twitter to praise the measures as a model for the White House to follow.¹⁵
12. But it remains to be seen whether Coimisiún na Meán does in fact introduce this rule in a strictly binding form in its final Code. It will be strongly opposed by big tech corporations. We urge the Committee to press Coimisiún na Meán to ensure that recommender systems are off by default, and that this is a strict and binding rule. We have the tools to address this crisis. Ireland can and should lead the world.

Notes

- ¹ U.N. investigators found that Meta played a “determining role” in Myanmar’s 2017 genocide. Amnesty International reported Meta’s algorithms were key contributors. See “U.N. investigators cite Facebook role in Myanmar crisis”, Reuters, 12 March 2018 (URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-facebook/u-n-investigators-cite-facebook-role-in-myanmar-crisis-idUSKCN1GO2PN>) and “The social atrocity: Meta and the right to remedy for the Rohingya”, Amnesty International, 2022 (URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ASA16/5933/2022/en/>), pp. 45-48, p. 71.
- ² “Rohingya Refugees File Petition Against Facebook in Indian Court”, Voice of America, 3 February 2024 (URL: <https://www.voanews.com/a/rohingya-refugees-file-petition-against-facebook-in-indian-court-/7470093.html>).
- ³ “YouTube Regrets: A crowdsourced investigation into YouTube’s recommendation algorithm”, Mozilla, July 2021 (URL: https://assets.mofoprod.net/network/documents/Mozilla_Youtube_Regrets_Report.pdf), pp 9-13.
- ⁴ *ibid.* p. 17.
- ⁵ “From Bad To Worse: Amplification and Auto-Generation of Hate”, ADL, 16 August 2023 (URL: <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/bad-worse-amplification-and-auto-generation-hate>)
- ⁶ Algorithms as a weapon against women, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, April 2022 (URL: <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Algorithms-as-a-weapon-against-women-ISD-RESET.pdf>).
- ⁷ “Driven into the darkness”, Amnesty International, 7 November 2023 (URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/tiktok-risks-pushing-children-towards-harmful-content/>).
- ⁸ Despite internal concern about amplifying hazardous content, from 2017 to 2020 Meta strongly amplified⁸ posts that received “emoji” reactions from other people. Then, despite internal research in 2019 confirming that content receiving “angry emojis” was more likely to be misinformation, it persisted until late 2020. “Five points for anger, one for a ‘like’: How Facebook’s formula fostered rage and misinformation”, *Washington Post*, 26 October 2021 (URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/26/facebook-angry-emoji-algorithm/>).
- ⁹ See previous reference to Myanmar genocide.
- ¹⁰ The Code will cover Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Udemy, TikTok, LinkedIn, X, Pinterest, Tumblr, and Reddit.
- ¹¹ “...that recommender algorithms based on profiling are turned off by default; ...that algorithms that engage explicitly or implicitly with special category data such as political views, sexuality, religion, ethnicity or health should have these aspects turned off by default;” Section 1.3 of Appendix 3 of the Draft Code.
- ¹² “More than 60 organisations urge strong action by Coimisiún na Meán on “recommender system” algorithms”, ICCL, 31 January 2024 (URL: <https://www.iccl.ie/news/62-organisations-urge-strong-action-by-coimisiun-na-mean-on-recommender-system-algorithms/>).
- ¹³ “82% of the Irish public wants Big Tech’s toxic algorithms switched off”, ICCL, 22 January 2024 (URL: <https://www.iccl.ie/news/82-of-the-irish-public-wants-big-techs-toxic-algorithms-switched-off/>).
Question: “Would you be in favour of social media companies being forced to stop building up specific data about you (your sexual desires, political and religious views, health conditions and or ethnicity) and using that data to pick what videos are shown to you (unless you have asked them to do this).”
Yes: 82%
No: 12%
Not sure: 6%
- ¹⁴ “Big Tech’s divisive ‘personalization’ attracts fresh call for profiling-based content feeds to be off by default in EU”, TechCrunch, 20 December 2023 (URL: <https://techcrunch.com/2023/12/20/dsa-recommender-systems/>).
- ¹⁵ <https://x.com/BedoyaFTC/status/1744450499791695938?s=20> and <https://x.com/BedoyaFTC/status/1749853979108913441?s=20>.