



Algorithmic explanation in the news

When covering TikTok and YouTube, we find little coverage about how the algorithm works in major French and English papers, nothing ongoing nor systematic. The Mozilla Foundation in 2021 released one of the largest global studies of YouTube’s recommendation system, called [RegretsReporter](#). Across the country, not a single national newsroom reported on the report. [Radio-Canada translated a story profiling the browser extension behind the project but not the results of Mozilla’s report.](#)

Public broadcasters do better in creating content explaining automated recommendations. [CBC’s Spark](#) and Radio-Canada’s [Decrypteurs](#) are both good examples of shows discussing the political and social sides of technologies. [CBC Kids has a helpful explainer video about algorithmic recommendation on social media](#) that shows how newsrooms can create resources beyond the news cycle to explain common technical literacy questions.

Platforms could do better explaining how their algorithms work in Canada

In our research, we found that there is a growing need for critical reporting from news organizations about algorithms and automated recommendations. We discovered only two blog posts from YouTube and five from TikTok explaining how their algorithms work. None of these articles had been translated into French.

These profiles discuss how automated recommendations work, but seldom why. In other words, TikTok and YouTube usually do not provide the reasons behind why algorithms work the way they do—the reasons justifying the presence of these algorithms on these platforms. When provided, explanations and justifications are global in scope, even though the quality of platform governance differs by region and by language.

10 tips for journalists

Journalism about algorithms has come in waves from early excitement about the internet to growing anxiety about social media's influence on society. Consequently, coverage of algorithms can ride these waves from enthusiasm to pessimism. Here are some ways to stay balanced in covering algorithmic recommendation:

1. **Be nuanced.** The impact of algorithms varies, and no clear causal evidence supports the claim that algorithms or AI are the principal source of online harms. Evidence suggests that algorithms may help break people out of filter bubbles by recommending diverse content.

2. **Consider the variety of algorithms.** There are many algorithms that perform very differently and have changed over time. [YouTube lists eight major milestones, from 2008 to 2021, for its algorithm.](#) Today's YouTube recommendations could be very different from recommendations a year or two ago. That fast pace creates a lot of uncertainty about what we can claim about algorithms. The best strategy for now is to be specific about the algorithm, its function, and version. Amanda Sriver's article about [TikTok users finding the LGBTQ communities they didn't know they were searching for](#) does a good job of including TikTok's explanation of its For You page, which is one way it promotes videos.

3. **Focus on the use case.** Algorithmic recommendations often meet demands, so the concern is less about algorithms recommending problematic content than users demanding that content. [Radio-Canada profiled Their.Tube, a project that tracks video recommendations for different personas](#) like conspiracy theorists or climate deniers.

Though trained on American content, the site shows how understanding user demand helps explain how and when algorithms might contribute to contentious media habits. Platforms like TikTok are already trying to train their algorithms to respond when a user appears to be requesting problematic content. Journalists have a good opportunity to report on how everyday users interact, understand, and cope with conditions on these platforms—stories not always found in the latest press release.

4. **Question personalization.** Algorithmic recommendation is often described as recommending personalized content, but what does personalization actually mean? The answer might seem obvious. Personalization might seem common sense, but much is still unclear about how algorithmic recommendation decides what's relevant to you, since these decisions might have as much to do with simple economics as data science.

5. **Translate global issues into local ones.** [YouTube's algorithm attracted international attention after concerns over its recommendations for children were reported in the Guardian. Jeff Yates translated those same tools and techniques to consider what YouTube might be recommending in Quebec. Searching for "Quebec mosque" one year after the mass shooting, he found that 17% of recommendations were conspiracy theories.](#) The experiment has not been repeated nor the methods improved upon, but the story is a great example of data journalism used to explain how algorithmic recommendation affects coverage of local issues, in this case national tragedies.

6. **Distinguish the how and why.** Explanations by platforms often focus on how algorithms work but not why. Platforms may seek to boost watch time on the site to create more opportunities for advertising: recommending recent content to ensure creators are hooked to the site. Look for explanations of metrics or optimization goals to distinguish technical details from the bigger picture.

7. **Consider the social as much as the technical aspects of algorithms.** Algorithms are technical inasmuch as they are complex operations that are computed for social media platforms. But they are also inherently social. Both the technical and social aspects of algorithms shape society in distinct ways.

8. **Diversify your sources.** Technology reporting too often relies on technical experts — computer scientists, engineers, mathematicians — to cover algorithms. Each has a very intricate understanding of algorithm's mechanics; however, they do not possess an equivalent grasp on how their technology may impact society. Anthropologists, sociologists, experts in communication, and many others scholars who have a specialized expertise in science, technology, and society can shed light on these multifaceted social nuances of algorithms.

9. **Check the hype.** When social media platforms announce an upcoming algorithm or technology, it is not actualized yet. Before it is tried and tested, a technology is a promise of what could be accomplished, one that does not always translate into reality.

10. **Fight for abundant and diversified tech coverage in your respective newsrooms.** Rigorous tech journalism is just as important as covering gadgets, trends, and business angles of the tech sector. Canadians need critical journalism on these issues, given how algorithms are increasingly shaping how content is produced and consumed on social media.