

From the Editors-in-Chief

ALGORITHMIC SYSTEMS, YOUTH AND RESPONSIBILITY: REFLECTIONS ON REGULATION AND DIGITAL WELL-BEING

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Abstract: In this Editorial, we discuss young people's digital well-being and the recent debates on algorithmic systems and temptations to regulate children's and young people's online activities and thus their digital agency.

Keywords: *youth, children, technology users, algorithmic systems, responsibility*



Young people's digital well-being has become a central public concern. In December 2025, Australia became the first country to prohibit access to certain social media platforms for users under the age of 16, and several other countries are now considering similar restrictions. Policymakers increasingly draw on research demonstrating how algorithmically curated information environments shape young users' cognitive development, social relationships, mental health, and sense of security. At the same time, public debate has emphasised the risks linked to harmful content, including cyberbullying, grooming and sexual harassment, and identity theft.

Digital platforms now structure the informational contexts in which children and young people grow, learn, and socialise. Recommendation algorithms, ranking systems, and targeted content delivery mechanisms profoundly influence the visibility of information and the prominence of particular narratives, ultimately shaping everyday digital experiences across media environments. This raises an important question: to what extent do young people recognise how their digital environments guide their attention and behaviour?

Whether banning access is an effective response remains contested. Van der Linden (2026) argues that bans "lack evidence" and fail to equip young people with the critical skills they need in contemporary digital environments. Furthermore, Armila et al. (2025) argue that digital youth-cultural agendas constitute a highly significant and dynamic arena in which young people can actively exercise various forms of digital agency. While we must acknowledge the ongoing complexity of governing algorithmic recommendation and targeting systems, it is equally important to keep children's rights, education, and broader digital well-being at the forefront.

European Regulation as the Primary Framework

Within the European Union, the most significant regulatory advances derive from EU-level governance. The Digital Services Act (DSA), fully applicable since 2024, imposes new obligations on online platforms that deploy recommender systems, including systemic risk assessments addressing fundamental rights and the mental well-being of minors. This marks an important shift in regulatory thinking: platforms must consider how their design choices, ranging from recommendation logic to user interface structures, may generate societal harms and must act to mitigate identified risks.

The DSA also strengthens transparency by requiring platforms to disclose the main parameters determining recommended content and to offer at least one non-profiling-based recommendation option. While these requirements do not fundamentally alter platform business models, they acknowledge that algorithmic systems are critical components of contemporary information governance.

Algorithmic governance differs fundamentally from traditional media regulation. Systems that dynamically curate and prioritise content respond to user behaviour, engagement signals, and predictive modelling. Gillespie (2018) has shown how these systems can amplify particular forms of interaction in ways that are difficult for users, especially young ones, to anticipate. For adolescents, who often engage deeply and frequently with digital platforms, these systems exert considerable influence on identity formation, community participation, and exposure to information.

Children's Rights and Algorithmic Systems

Tensions between protection and participation have long characterised discussions of children's rights. Livingstone and Third (2017) note that these tensions span multiple levels of governance and have intensified over time, with concerns that children's rights are increasingly subordinated to protection-oriented approaches.

European data protection law establishes heightened responsibilities when processing children's data, and organisations must demonstrate particular care when profiling minors. Yet privacy regulation alone cannot address the broader societal implications of algorithmically personalised environments. Platforms may comply with data protection requirements while still deploying recommender systems that amplify harmful or emotionally charged content, encourage compulsive use, or reinforce echo chambers.

In Finland, public debate has emphasised the potential impact of digital platforms on young people's mental health, prompting authorities to explore guidelines on children's use of digital devices and social media. Educational institutions, families, and civil society organisations therefore play essential roles in cultivating digital resilience and fostering critical awareness of algorithmic systems.

Media literacy has become increasingly recognised as a core competency for young citizens navigating complex online environments providing a solid foundation that support young people in understanding how algorithmic systems shape digital experiences. Instead of implementing bans, states could invest in initiatives that promote children's and adolescents' digital well-being. Critical media literacy, which has also been described as an infrastructure of democracy (Jolls & Johnsen 2018, 1383), represents a particularly valuable direction for future development.

In public and policy debates on digital safety and regulation, young people's own competencies and everyday digital practices often remain obscured. While discussions tend to focus on risks and protections, they seldom recognise nuanced skills, peer learning, and adaptive strategies through which young people already navigate algorithmic environments. Bringing these perspectives into the core of the discussions would be essential for developing governance approaches that support, rather than diminish, children's and young people's digital agency.

Challenges of Governing Algorithmic Environments

Governing algorithmic systems remains complex due to their dynamic, evolving nature. Machine-learning-driven optimisation processes and iterative design adjustments generate effects that emerge through the interaction of users, platform architectures, and broader social contexts. The global operations of major platforms further complicate national regulatory efforts. While the DSA represents a significant attempt to harmonise regulatory standards across EU member states, effective implementation requires sustained collaboration among regulators, researchers, educators, and technology companies.

It is well-known that algorithmic systems are not neutral. They reflect values, norms and assumptions about engagement, attention, and human behaviour of their creators. A human-centred approach to governance must therefore prioritise the rights and well-being of individuals, particularly children and young people.

Finding balance to protect children and young people online and to maximize their opportunities and benefits of connectivity is essential (Livingstone & Third 2017). For scholars working at the intersection of youth studies and human–technology interaction, recent developments raise important research questions: How can algorithmic systems be designed to support healthy development and well-being among young users of different ages? What forms of transparency are meaningful and understandable for adolescents? And least but not last: how might participatory approaches, including the voices of young people themselves, inform more responsible platform governance?

These questions call for continued, inclusive dialogue among policymakers, researchers, educators, and young people themselves.

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Human Technology
ISSN 1795-6889
<https://ht.csr-pub.eu>