

Parents need better support to develop digital literacies for themselves and their children, researcher says

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Parents should be taught how to better understand the increasingly volatile social media landscape that is deploying sophisticated

algorithms, according to a new study from the University of Surrey.

The study investigated how parents interpret and navigate social media algorithms that are central to their children's digital experiences.

The research found that a [child's age](#) shaped their parent's perspective on a platform's [algorithm](#). For example, the study revealed that parents of toddlers who watched YouTube, while concerned, often regarded their fears to be an issue for the future.

Researchers also found that parents' own views on [social media platforms](#) often influence how they manage their children's online activities. Even though parents think their own online data is different from their offspring's, the study found a lot of overlap because of shared family information and data.

Professor Ranjana Das, lead investigator and Professor of Media and Communication at the University of Surrey, said, "Parents engage with so many platforms in the course of their day-to-day parenting. We wanted to see how they make sense of and interact with the algorithms responsible for serving themselves and their children with the content on those platforms."

Professor Das interviewed 30 parents who are raising children aged 0 to 18 across England.

According to the study, there are four distinct patterns of how parents understand social media algorithms:

- **Misunderstandings:** Parents held mistaken assumptions about how an algorithm works. For example, one parent struggled to comprehend YouTube content recommendations for her son, mistakenly linking them to subscriptions.

- Parked understandings: Parents possessed an awareness of algorithms but felt their concerns could be deferred for when their child was older—labeling it as a 'future issue'.
- Transactional understandings: Some parents accepted algorithms' influence as part of modern life. Some parents used child filters but felt resigned to the role of algorithms.
- Proactive understandings: Parents took immediate action to address algorithmic impacts. For example, a parent in the study actively monitored YouTube recommendations for his son to flag inappropriate content.

Professor Das continued, "We want our findings to help policymakers devise strategies to promote better data and digital literacies among the [adult population](#). We want to shift the focus away from parental blame. We need to find ways to support [parents](#), caregivers and families to navigate and negotiate a data-driven world."

The full study has been published in the *Journal of Children and Media*.

More information: Ranjana Das, Parents' understandings of social media algorithms in children's lives in England: Misunderstandings, parked understandings, transactional understandings and proactive understandings amidst datafication, *Journal of Children and Media* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/17482798.2023.2240899](https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2023.2240899)

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