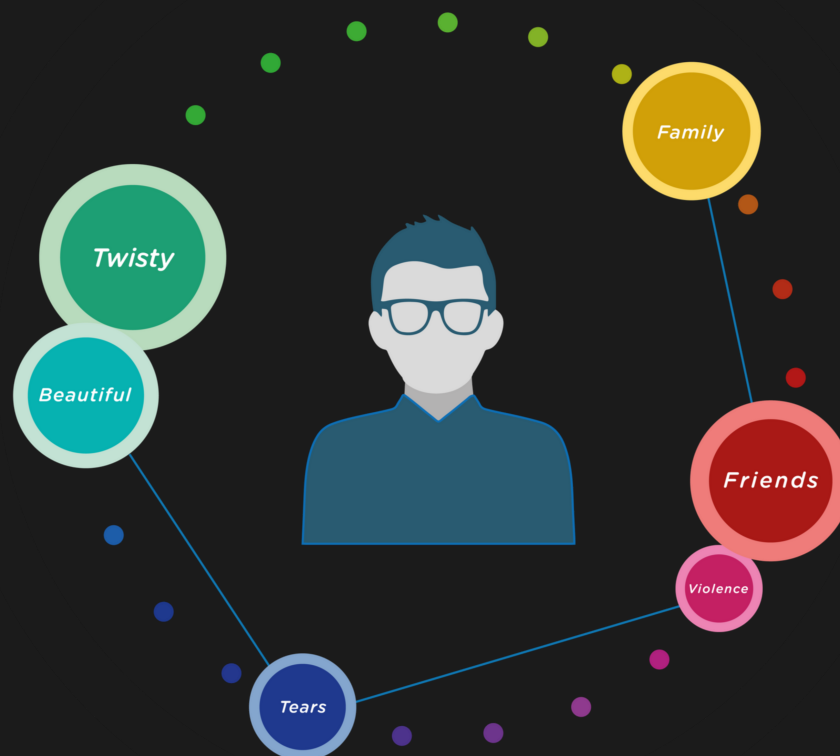




# "Personalization is broken"

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE THAT?



A CONVERSATION WITH  
YOUNG STUDENTS ATTENDING  
THE #JUMPINTECH PROGRAM

Tristan Harris is a former Design Ethicist at Google. He became a world expert on ethical issues in Technology and founded Time Well Spent, an NGO raising awareness on digital addictions, in 2013. The statement he made in May at VivaTech created some debate in the Tech & Media industry: “Personalization is broken. If you click on a 9/11 video you’ll get a bunch of videos about conspiracy theories straight after. How can we improve that?”

As co-founder of Spideo, a start-up developing a SaaS solution enabling creative industries to personalize content, I can’t run away from this question. Like many people I have always felt that the Youtube recommender system was not working very well, but the way Tristan Harris phrased his opinion made me think a lot about what should be our position in this debate.

In 2016, two years before GDPR came to life, we published a paper raising awareness on the fact that Data Protection represents a great opportunity for the development and improvement of personalization and discovery experiences.

This is how we feel about transparency and this is what we observe with our customers. The Cambridge Analytica scandal created more visibility on the issue of Data Privacy. Tristan Harris’ talk in Paris is just one more signal that our position regarding Personalization and AI is not something we should keep for professionals in the industry only. We try to share our convictions about user transparency openly in the public debate as often as possible with NGOs (Ars Industrialis), Public Authorities (CNIL, CSA) and Researchers (IRI).

“#Personalisation is broken. If you click on a 9/11 video you’ll get a bunch of videos about conspiracy theories straight after. How can we improve that?” @tristanharris @VivaTech #TechForGood vs #TechForBad #VivaTech



1. [https://twitter.com/noon\\_rocks/status/999670840743653376](https://twitter.com/noon_rocks/status/999670840743653376)
2. Data Protection for Recommendation Engines: Obstacle or Opportunity? Spideo, June 2016. “Keeping the best interest of users in mind is paramount. Transparency and making sure users understand why they are being recommended specific content is key to building lasting relationships and cementing loyalty”.
3. [https://linc.cnil.fr/sites/default/files/typo/document/CNIL\\_CAHIERS\\_IP3.pdf](https://linc.cnil.fr/sites/default/files/typo/document/CNIL_CAHIERS_IP3.pdf)
4. <https://www.csa.fr/Informer/Le-CSA-lab/Les-publications/Les-mutations-de-la-mise-a-disposition-de-contenus-audiovisuels-a-l-ere-du-numerique-consequences-et-enjeux-Le-role-des-donnees-et-des-algorithmes-dans-l-acces-aux-contenus>
5. <https://www.iri.centrepompidou.fr/actualites/new-industrial-world-forum-2017/>
6. <http://becomtech.fr/>

Recently we decided to talk about it with a group of twenty young girls (aged 14 to 18) attending a new educational program called #JumpInTech. This program is provided by BecomTech and aims at girls in middle and high school to initiate digital skills and computer science in order to reduce gender gap in the Tech world. Initially I was just supposed to be a speaker in this program as part of my (humble) effort to give back to the community. However my intervention turned out



to be much more than that. As I was beginning to talk it became a challenging brainstorm. Much more insightful in fact than any focus group we have ever organized at Spideo.

The twenty girls all declared unanimously that Youtube was their main access to video content. So we improvised some sort of experiment with them: three different groups, each group making one distinct interaction on content through a private window of a web browser, followed by a 10 minute conversation amongst themselves.

The intent was to make the #JumpInTech girls realise how personalization is impacting their Youtube experience, discuss their reactions collectively and see whether this experimentation was generating any question or concern from their point of view.

## Group #1

The first group decided to type “afro trap” and watched a music video by MHD (French rapper from Paris, precursor of Afro Trap, a mixture of African music and trap music).

Here’s what the homepage proposed after that:

The screenshot shows a YouTube homepage with a sidebar on the left and a main content area. The sidebar includes navigation options like 'Accueil', 'Tendances', 'Historique', and 'LE MEILLEUR DE YOUTUBE' with categories like 'Musique', 'Sport', 'Jeux vidéo et autr...', 'Films', 'Émissions télévis...', 'Actualités', 'En direct', and 'Vidéo à 360°'. The main content area is titled 'Recommandations' and displays a grid of video thumbnails with titles and view counts. The videos include:

- VEGEDREAM - RAMENEZ LA COUPE A LA MAISON (2.2 M vues)
- Champion du monde 2018 : Le parcours de Blaise Matuidi... (106 k vues)
- [EXCLU] Soolking "Guérilla" #PlanèteRap (108 M vues)
- Aya Nakamura - Djadja (Clip officiel) (111 M vues)
- Dj Babs - Tout est bon Ft 4Keus (Clip Officiel) (13 M vues)
- JAI VOMI AU CROSSFIT !! (501 k vues)
- Cardi B & J Balvin - I Like It [Official Music... (314 M vues)
- LES MEILLEUR SNAP AU QUARTIER VS POLICE... (615 k vues)
- P'Tain de m'rde NAZA (961 k vues)
- MALAISE TV & LES PIRES K-SOS DU NET ! #55 (803 k vues)

At the bottom, there is a section for 'Lama Fiché' with a 'SABONNER 3,7 M' button and a grid of recommended videos including 'LES 13 TOBOGANS LES PLUS INCROYABLES DU...', '10 ANIMAUX IMPOSSIBLE A TUER', 'LES 10 ROUTES LES PLUS DANGEREUSES DU MONDE...', '10 FAUX RICHES QUI SONT PAUVRES EN VRAI', and '10 ADOLESCENTS QUI ONT CHOCQUÉ LE MONDE'.

## > Reactions:

[Globally well connected content but a bunch of very weird results in the recommendations section resulted in strong reactions]. “Look at that: ‘Champion du monde’, ‘Malaises TV’, ‘Les meilleurs snaps au quartier’, what is that doing here?”

The Lama Faché channel created debate. One girl spontaneously said: “Yeah I like that!”.

Others admitted they like it too but all agreed that it’s hard to understand the connections between this and the Afro Trap world.

## Group #2

The second group decided to type “Beauté Algérienne” [Algerian Beauty] and watched the official video clip of DJ Kayz (French DJ of Algerian Kabyle origin famous for his music mix series Oran Mix Party).

The homepage then looked like this:

The screenshot shows a YouTube homepage with a sidebar on the left and a main content area. The sidebar includes navigation options like 'Accueil', 'Tendances', 'Historique', and 'LE MEILLEUR DE YOUTUBE' with categories like 'Musique', 'Sport', 'Jeux vidéo et autr...', 'Films', 'Émissions télévis...', 'Actualités', 'En direct', and 'Vidéo à 360°'. The main content area is divided into 'Tendances' and 'Recommandations'. The 'Tendances' section features five video thumbnails with titles and view counts. The 'Recommandations' section features ten video thumbnails with titles and view counts.

Section	Video Title	Views	Time
Tendances	ON LIT VOS SMS CAR SON NUMÉRO A FUITÉ...	3,2 M vues	10:44
	RimK - Air Max ft. Ninho	1,7 M vues	3:29
	BONBONS GÉANTS XXL vs BONBONS MINIATURES / 7...	353 k vues	10:24
	Maéva (LMvsMonde3): Fiançailles, Drame de sa vie...	159 k vues	18:05
	Je dessine sur des chaussures ! (Custom au...	132 k vues	7:58
Recommandations	L'Algériño - Hola ft. Boef [Clip officiel]	8 M vues	3:34
	DJ Hamida feat. Hafssa Da & CHK - "CHEKAMA" ,G٢٢٢.L...	2,2 M vues	4:11
	Marwa Loud - Bad Boy (Clip Officiel)	21 M vues	3:38
	Maroon 5 - Girls Like You ft. Cardi B	452 M vues	4:31
	AWA IMANI - C'est le Sang feat. ALRIMA (clip officiel)	3,2 M vues	3:13
	Dosseeh - Habitué	20 M vues	3:38
	Zouhair Bahaoui - Hasta Luego ft TiwTiw & CHK...	156 M vues	3:21
	Kader Japonais - Fi aachkek cheft el wile (Clip Officiel)...	9,4 M vues	5:46
	Dj Babs - Tout est bon Ft 4Keus (Clip Officiel)	13 M vues	3:21
	L'Algériño - Va Bene [Clip Officiel B.O Taxi 5]	151 M vues	5:16

## > Reactions:

“Bad Boy really? Why is it here?”

[Many girls laughed]

“Ahahah Marwa Loud” (she’s a French singer of Moroccan origin).

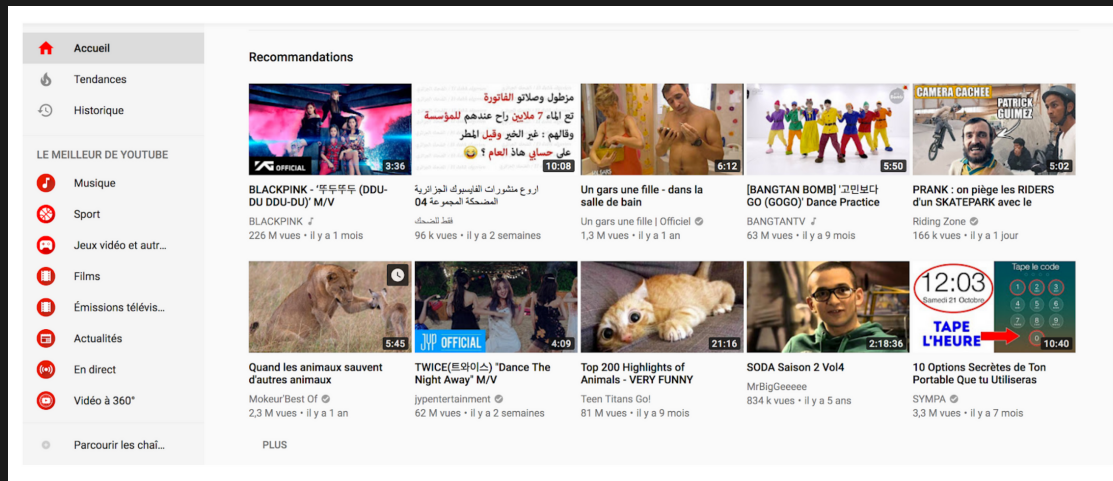
“My understanding is that Youtube is pushing artists with a vague Arabic background even if it does not always make sense. Look at ‘Kader Japonais’. It does not make sense at all. Maybe it’s just because it’s written Kader in the title.”

“It’s disappointing that we get stuck with this Arabic thing.” “Yeah I’d prefer more diversity, something that does not lock us in there.”

### Group #3

The third group decided to type in “bts dope” and watched the first video displayed in the results (Dope is a song of South Korean boy group called BTS, also known as Bangtan Boys, a seven-member South Korean music band formed by Big Hit Entertainment).

Once refreshed, the homepage was showing this:



> Reactions:

[Generally disappointing]

“It’s a pity that almost nothing is related to K-pop”.

“Look all that: ‘10 options sur ton portables’ [10 options on your mobile], ‘Quand les animaux sauvent d’autres animaux’ [When animals save other animals], ‘Highlights of animals’, ‘un gars une fille’ [famous French TV series about the life of a typical couple in their early thirties], ‘Riders dans un skatepark’ [Riders in a skatepark]. I feel that it’s coming out of the blue”.

“I think these results are really poor because it depends on geographic criteria. I’m not saying K-pop is not interesting for people in Europe but it’s less likely to be considered a cool thing compared to French Hip-Hop”.

“When I see this I have the feeling that Youtube is trying to influence my choices and take me away from what I like for things that they want to promote. It’s annoying, I don’t like that”.

What struck me when observing these reactions was:

- I/ The level of awareness of the girls attending this program. Even if they can’t explain things from a technical point of view yet, they have great intuitions about how the Youtube recommender system tends to mix content-based strategies with popularity criteria.
- II/ Ethical questions arise very quickly. They do have strong opinions about what’s right or wrong with personalized recommendations.

So what's at stake with Personalization? and "How can we improve that?" as Tristan Harris asks for.

I believe there's only one way to do better: let people know what keywords are attached to their profile, what are the key variables of the algorithm and give them tools to configure these key variables themselves. By doing so you enable users to provide insightful feedback on the way the system works and what can be relevant for them. The majority of users may not be interested in playing with these tools. But the minority of proactive users will progressively raise everyone's awareness.

Outside the digital world, take the example of a restaurant: before you make a choice you want to know what ingredients are in

7. <https://www.slideshare.net/xamat/recommender-systems-in-industry>

your dish. More than that, you feel considered once you get the impression that you can talk about the food with the waiter and the waiter tells you that he or she will communicate your preferences to the Chef.

Xavier Amatriain, former Research Engineering Director at Netflix, said during Recsys 2017: "Explanations might matter more than the prediction" (7). The way I see things I'd say: Explanations matter as much as recommendations. The main idea however is: engaging people with cultural content requires mutual understanding.

In the long run, Personalization & Discovery experiences are only valuable for both users and content platforms when these are provided in a transparent, trusted and controllable manner.



Thibault d'Orso  
COO & Co-founder

Founded in 2010 and headquartered in Paris, Spideo is committed to provide elegant engagement solutions for creative industries. We craft technology with the obsession of achieving the maximum desired effect with the simplest effort.

We specialize in Personalization with the firm belief that Artificial Intelligence creates wealth and knowledge for everyone when it is combined with Transparency & Control.