

How algorithms shape our online experience – Middle & Senior Years:

## DECODING THE ALGORITHM: Discussion guide

### Tips for facilitating a productive discussion

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1. Start with observations, then move to interpretations. Ask students to describe what they noticed in their feeds before asking them to analyze what it means.
2. Encourage comparison. Have students notice differences between classmates' feeds. Make the differences visible and discuss some reasons for them.
3. Discourage judgement about specific apps or content. Focus on how the system works, not whether particular content or interests are "good" or "bad".
4. Use evidence from Part 1. Encourage students to refer to the categories, interests, and unexpected videos they wrote about.
5. Give room for thought. Students may need time to think before responding. Short pauses often lead to deeper responses.
6. Go with the flow! Deviate from this guide to serve the interests of your learners.

### DISCUSSION QUESTION 1

#### ***What did you learn about how much the app seems to know about you?***

- What clues from your homepage suggest the app has learned something about you?
- Did the app reflect your real interests accurately, or were some predictions surprising?
- What kinds of actions (likes, watch time, searches) might help the algorithm learn about you?

#### ***Some responses may include:***

- Observation the same/different system is working across different apps.
- Discrepancies/alignment between suggested content and their stated interests.
- Insights about different types of data being collected, such as age, gender or location, and how that affects what the learners are seeing.

### DISCUSSION QUESTION 2

#### ***How might algorithms shape what we think is popular or important online?***

- How does the order of videos on your homepage affect what you watch first?
- If many people see similar recommendations, how might this influence trends, popular opinion, or attitudes?
- Could an algorithm make something seem more popular than it actually is? Why would this happen? Who would it benefit? What other effects might this have?

#### ***Some responses may include:***

- Understanding the interplay between engagement and revenue for creators and platforms.
- Awareness of feedback loops: where an algorithm amplifies certain topics in order to increase engagement, while silencing others.

### DISCUSSION QUESTION 3

***What content might be missing from your feed, and why?***

- Which of your personal interests appeared least on your homepage?
- What kinds of videos or perspectives might the algorithm filter out?
- How could this filtering affect what you learn or feel is important in the real world?

***Some responses may include:***

- Realizations that some interests are underrepresented online because they interact with these interests less online.
- Thoughts about how filters limit our exposure to differing ideas, viewpoints, culture or news.

### DISCUSSION QUESTION 4

***How might repeated exposure to similar content shape people's beliefs or habits?***

- What happens when someone sees the same type of content over and over?
- Could algorithms strengthen certain interests or opinions over time?
- How might this affect how people see other groups or viewpoints?

***Some responses may include:***

- Understanding that repeated exposure can reinforce interests, opinions or behaviours, such as fitness trends, risk-taking, political viewpoints, or lifestyle choices.
- Positive examples of how algorithms could encourage self-improvement, education or creativity.

### DISCUSSION QUESTION 5

***Who has the most control over what you see online – the user or the platform?***

- What actions can users take to influence what the algorithm shows them?
- What decisions are made by the platform rather than the user?
- How could someone take more control of their feed if they wanted to?

***Some responses may include:***

- Statements about shared control, or relationship between algorithm and user.
- Strategies for diversifying or curating the feed: "gaming the algorithm" or other ways to ensure a balanced view of media.

### CLOSING PROMPT

***After today, how might you use or view social media and algorithms differently?***