How YouTube AutoPlay Becomes Your Child's Worst Nightmare

I myself am not yet a parent, but I can understand why parents often get overwhelmed. Far be it from me to judge any parents who feel the need to hand their kids the iPhone for a few minutes now and then.

But please, keep your small children away from YouTube.

Sure, they'll probably start out watching clips from innocuous shows like "Peppa Pig" or "Paw Patrol," but it's all too easy for them to end up in much darker territory.

"Most of these kids are too small to even use a website," writer and artist James Brindle explains in his TED talk on children's YouTube videos:

> *And so there's AutoPlay… and there's so much weirdness in the system now that AutoPlay takes you to some pretty strange places. Within, like, a dozen steps, you can go from a cute video of a counting train to masturbating Mickey Mouse… What you have is software pulling in all of these different influences to automatically generate kids' worst nightmares.*

AutoPlay uses keywords to queue up new videos based on what's currently being watched, and I can promise you that the algorithms deciding which video comes next do not care about your children. In fact, much of this content consists of low-quality videos produced in bulk by who knows what type of person and slapped with word salad titles ("Spiderman Breaks His Arm! w/ Princess Jasmine, Doctor Wolverine & Joker in Real Life," for example) designed solely to trick the algorithms and bring in ad revenue, while possibly traumatizing your child in the process. A mother who hands her kid a smartphone while she cooks dinner might come back an hour later to find

him crying after watching Elsa from “Frozen” being graphically murdered by a Marvel superhero.

Take this video for instance. I’m sure this kid started off with some perfectly innocent videos exploring the endless creative possibilities available in “Roblox,” a “Minecraft”-like video game popular with young children. But then, one algorithmic suggestion led to another, and soon her search history was filled with “Hot Roblox Sex” videos.

The girl (or boy) crying in the video sounds younger than ten, probably too young even to know what sex is despite her burgeoning porn addiction. I imagine her stumbling onto this depraved content, knowing it was wrong but unsure of why, sickened yet unable to stop watching. Her shame at being caught is enough to break my heart.

YouTube has released a kid’s version of the app, but these traumatizing videos can still slip through the filters.

As Brindle observes, these algorithms encode and magnify “the absolute worst aspects of human nature,” empowering shadowy content creators motivated by some mixture of greed and sadism to prey on children.

It may mean a sacrifice of time and quiet on our part, but isn’t it worth it to keep our children away from such predators?

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