

# French Censors Target Children With Down Syndrome

A public-service TV ad—‘Dear Future Mom’—is rejected because it could trigger guilty feelings.

[Sohrab Ahmari](#) May 24, 2017 6:32 p.m. ET



A still from the "Dear Future Mom" video. Photo: YouTube

*By*

*Sohrab Ahmari*

*Paris*

You can learn a lot about a society by paying attention to what it censors. The Soviet Union went to great lengths to block the truth about freedom and prosperity in the West. Today China's ruling Communists suppress historical memory of their crimes, above all the Tiananmen Square

massacre, while the censors in my native Iran are obsessed with women's bodies.

Then there's France, where the government has proscribed a public-service commercial that shows children with Down syndrome describing the joy of growing up with an extra pair of chromosomes. The decision has triggered a free-speech battle royal that may soon reach Europe's highest rights court.

The 2014 ad, "[Dear Future Mom](#)," addresses a pregnant woman who has just discovered her baby has Down syndrome. "Dear future mom," says one child. "Don't be afraid," says another. "Your child will be able to do many things." "He'll be able to hug you." "He'll be able to run toward you." And so on.

Several European Down syndrome associations came together to sponsor the ad. These included France's Jérôme Lejeune Foundation, named after the geneticist who discovered the link between chromosomal abnormalities and conditions like Down syndrome, and who went on to campaign against prenatal diagnosis and abortion of babies with Down syndrome.

"In France the rate of detected DS pregnancies that result in abortion is 96%," the foundation's president, Jean-Marie Le Méné, tells me in an interview. He fears that the advent of new tests that can detect the syndrome earlier and with greater precision will push that rate to 100%—the eradication of an entire category of human beings.

Hence the "Dear Future Mom" ad. When it was released in March 2014, for World Down Syndrome Day, the ad broke records for social-media "shares" in a 24-hour period. Matteo Renzi, Italy's prime minister at the time, was one of the millions of users who shared it.

In France three TV networks agreed to carry it as a public service. The feedback was glowing—until that summer, when the government's High

Audiovisual Council, or CSA, issued a pair of regulatory bulletins interdicting the ad. The regulator said it was reacting to audience complaints.

It wasn't until after the foundation retained legal counsel, in December 2014, that the nature of the audience complaints became clear. There were only two.

The first objected to the foundation's antiabortion position generally rather than the ad itself. The other came from a woman who had terminated a pregnancy after receiving a Down syndrome diagnosis. She still mourned that child every day, she wrote. Using the familiar lexicon of contemporary censorship, she added that she found watching the ad "violent."

The foundation appealed, and the case eventually came before the Council of State, France's highest administrative court. The council in November affirmed the ban, holding that the ad could "disturb the conscience" of women who had had abortions after a Down syndrome diagnosis.

A spokeswoman for the CSA wouldn't comment on the record. But the regulator insists it was applying French laws that prohibit political messages during TV commercial time. "Dear Future Mom," the CSA says, didn't rise to "general interest" because it presented one side of a political debate.

This is a pretext. In its [initial notice](#), published June 25, 2014, the CSA conceded that the ad "shows a positive image of the life of young people with Down syndrome and encourages society to work in favor of their integration and fulfillment"—a message that is squarely in the public interest and apolitical.

Which leaves only the viewer's complaint of being traumatized. If subjective feelings suffice, any advocacy speech could be restricted—and unpopular minorities like people with Down syndrome are most likely to

be silenced.

For the foundation, the claim that the ad evokes feelings of guilt only attests to its moral truth. Says spokeswoman Stéphanie Billot : “When you show a video of DS kids who say, ‘Well, I won’t be normal, but I will still be able to love you,’ the guilt becomes so unbearable that society rejects it. It’s a common, unconscious guilt for all who said nothing about the effort to systematically eliminate DS.” Guilt can be salutary.

The foundation this month lodged an appeal with the European Court of Human Rights, asserting free-speech violations as well as genetic discrimination. It helps that France is an outlier. The ad has aired in Britain, Croatia, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, Spain and the U.S., among others. No other government took similar action against it.

The European court accepts fewer than 1 in 10 petitions, and the foundation will have to prove harm, since the ad did air as intended in 2014. That won’t be difficult, however, since the CSA says the purpose of the interdiction notice was to discourage networks from airing similar content. Several French broadcasters declined to run “Dear Future Mom” this year, citing a shortage of advertising time.

*Mr. Ahmari is a Journal editorial writer in London.*