

# News #foryou on TikTok: A Digital Methods-Based Study

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Jonathan Hendrickx<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

TikTok is rapidly establishing itself as an important platform for contemporary digital journalism but explorations on its transnational journalistic usage thus far remain limited in size and scope. Hence, this explorative study adopts a digital methods approach to collect and assess 26,473 TikTok videos posted by 91 European news outlets between 2019 and 2022. Rooted conceptually in affordance and hybridity theory and methodologically in digital methods, the study theorizes digital production trends by drawing on a proposed typology of visual, hashtags, and auditory affordances. News outlets studied adhere to visual and hashtag affordances, but much less so to auditory ones.

## Keywords

TikTok, news, journalism, social media, digital methods, affordances

## Introduction

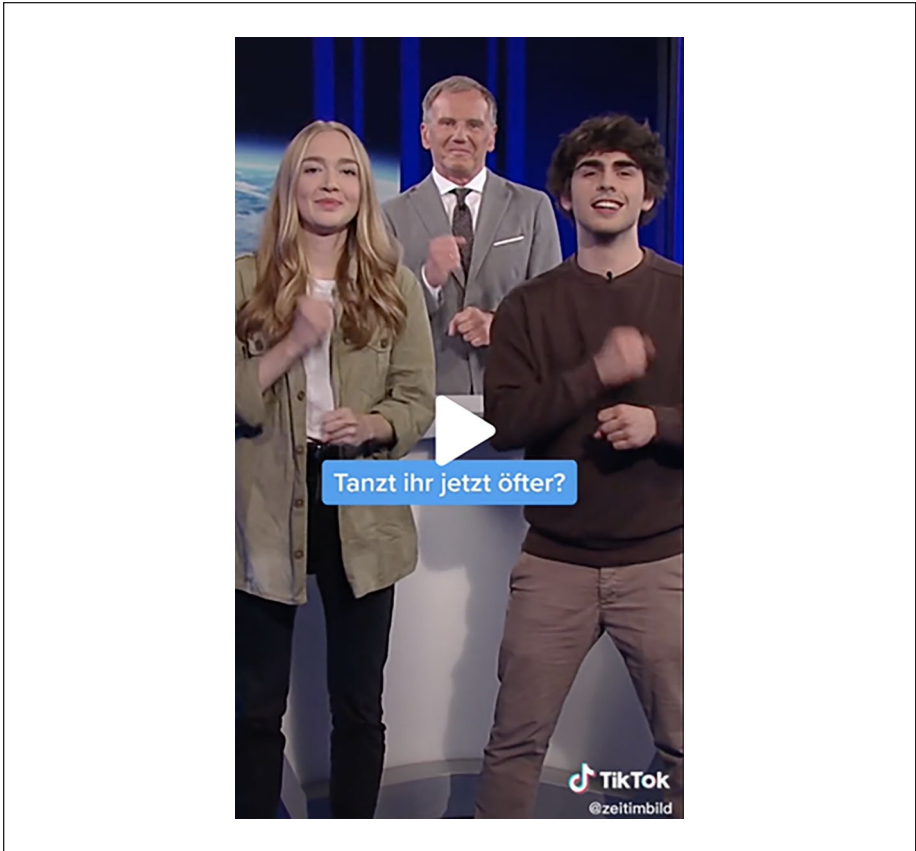
On 18 October 2021, *Zeit im Bild (ZiB)*, the TV news broadcast of the Austrian public service broadcaster, launched a TikTok channel. In its inaugural video, Armin Wolf, a seasoned journalist and news anchor, announced that *ZiB* would also be active on TikTok, “but not with a white old man,” referring to himself. Subsequently, he was joined by two younger reporters who would become regular faces in *ZiB*’s TikTok output. All three subsequently performed a dance routine popular on TikTok at the time (see Figure 1). *ZiB* constitutes just one of many news outlets that uses TikTok as an additional diffusion platform. This article assesses 91 of them.

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<sup>1</sup>University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

### Corresponding Author:

Jonathan Hendrickx, University of Copenhagen, 8 Karen Blixens Plads 8, Copenhagen 2300, Denmark.  
Email: [Johe@hum.ku.dk](mailto:Johe@hum.ku.dk)



**Figure 1.** Screenshot of ZIB's First TikTok video. The Caption Translates as "Do You Dance More Often Now?".

Launched globally in 2018, the Chinese short-form video website TikTok has emerged as a highly popular social media platform. Its intense recommendation algorithm plays different videos automatically on the so-called "For You" page upon launching the app (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Brands and news organizations alike perceive TikTok as a new means to attain young, new audiences and boast brand awareness (Nurjannah & Surianto, 2022). The Digital News Report 2024 "highlights the strong shift towards video-based networks such as YouTube, TikTok (and Instagram), all of which have grown in importance for news since the COVID-19 pandemic drove new habits" (Newman et al., 2024, p. 12). The platform is particularly popular among young audiences, with the same report finding that nearly a quarter of all 18- to 24-year-olds used TikTok for news in the last week across 47 surveyed countries worldwide. Other recent work has highlighted how among British teens aged 12 to 15, TikTok has emerged as the most popular source of news, only beaten by public broadcaster BBC's reach across all platforms (Ofcom, 2024).

These user-based findings confirm the need for more in-depth research on news outlets' presence on TikTok. Hence, this article constructs a vast dataset of 91 European news outlets as retrieved in the 2022 edition of the Digital News Report. Using TikTok's API and operationalizing a digital methods approach, 26,473 videos were collected and assessed as to how they adhere to TikTok's unique affordances, building on previous empirical and conceptual work on affordances and hybridity. To enhance the article's contribution, the self-assembled inventory of outlets has been made publicly available on Open Science Framework for future researchers here. This includes a Gantt chart outlining all 91 outlets per type and country, as well as detailed information when they started posting news content to TikTok.

## Theoretical Framework

### *News, Social Media Platforms and Their Hybridity*

Since their widespread launch in the late 2000s, social media platforms such as TikTok have blurred previously existing boundaries between who creates and shares news and other types of media content. In the contemporary news ecosystem, "hybrid forms of news and current affairs journalism have become the rule rather than the exception" while at the same time "mainstream media have long lost their monopoly on the news and journalists have integrated social media into their daily routines" (Mast et al., 2017, p. 3). Although news media have always been obsessed with the so-called "newness" of emerging technologies across oral, print, electric, and digital media that are all hybrid in nature. Chadwick (2017) said newness has been found to be a key feature of "social media adoption in journalism practices" along with "convergence, fragmentation and the changing relationship with audiences" (Gulyás, 2016, p. 403).

Hybridity has been criticized for being a catch-all term with its true meaning often depending on the level of analysis, be they media systems, institutions, or journalistic cultures or practices (Hallin et al., 2023). The authors hold the view that hybridity in a journalism studies context "makes the most sense when we want to make reference to the origin of a new form in some particular process of borrowing, appropriation or influence, or to some particular combination of practices or logics which seems not to make sense and to call out for explanation" (p. 232). Before, Chadwick had operationalized fieldwork on British political news making at the onset of the 2010s to discuss how the rise of bloggers and social media led to "hybrid news spaces" wherein "a blog post can quickly circulate and become the subject of a professional journalist's story" (2017, p. 214). Since then, platforms such as Medium and Substack have professionalized blogs and long-form online journalism (Kaur, 2024).

Meanwhile, the increasing dominance of social media platforms continues to profoundly alter the production, dissemination, and consumption of news content. Studies on news consumption via platforms such as Facebook and Twitter limit the agency of media brands and users to sharing news website content within the constraints of a Facebook post or a tweet. This has led to the acknowledged rise of social media editors in newsrooms (Opgenhaffen & Hendrickx, 2023) and to the dependence of large media corporations on algorithmic-driven platforms as capricious external drivers of traffic

(Meese & Hurcombe, 2021). The latter authors conclude that “these moments of dependence are always partial and transitory, as news media companies keep repositioning themselves in a changing environment” (p. 11), for instance, by increasingly diversifying their distribution strategies. This ties in with the emergence and rising prevalence of what has been referred to as social media journalism, or the news content created for predominantly video-driven social media platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, and, increasingly, TikTok (Hendrickx, 2021, 2023). These platforms share a focus on video content consumed within their own ecosystems (Al-Rawi et al., 2021).

Just as has been the case in recent years with platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Snapchat, YouTube, and Instagram, we are now witnessing a sharp rise of media usage and scholarly interest in TikTok, both in general and as a news source. For instance, the role perceptions of journalists on the platform have been questioned as they aim to combine traditional quality and social media-driven virality roles and functions (Degen et al., 2024; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2023). Hase et al. (2023), and Hendrickx & Vázquez-Herrero (2024) studied news content published by outlets from various countries across social media platforms but only found limited evidence for outlets adhering to their logics and, thus, hybridity. However, operationalizing a content analysis of American, Australian, and British news organizations’ TikTok channels, Salb (2021) had previously reasoned that English-language legacy news organizations are progressively adopting distinct social media logics in their TikTok posts, for instance, by relying on its typical characteristics such as music and hashtags. This ties in with the study of 19 news profiles on TikTok by Vázquez-Herrero et al. (2022), who also found hashtags and sound effects to be two of the most overt signals of news media adapting to the unique logics of TikTok. They found that only under half of all posts were related to current events. Notwithstanding, the 2024 Reuters Institute Report on journalism, media and technology trends and predictions found that whereas news publishers’ sentiment toward Facebook and X has worsened, their interest in TikTok continues to climb (Newman, 2024). Thus, while the body of academic knowledge of the blurring boundaries and the hybridity between TikTok and journalism is expanding, it remains limited at the time of writing. This explorative study aims to fill said gap in scholarship.

### *News, Social Media Platforms, and Their Affordances*

A recent trend in journalism and wider social sciences research is the rapid adoption of affordances theory to signify the array of specific “opportunities or possibilities” of all of nature’s offerings (Gibson, 1986, p. 18). As one of the author’s poignant examples reads: “fire affords warmth on a cold night; it also affords being burnt” (ibid, p. 101). Affordances theory stems from the field of environmental psychology and was only recently gradually extrapolated to communication technologies active in the digital environment, such as social media platforms (Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Neiger, 2018).

Davis and Chouinard (2016, p. 241) have defined affordances as “the range of functions and constraints that an object provides for, and places upon, structurally situated

subjects” and “the dynamic link between subjects and objects within sociotechnical systems.” Evans et al. (2017) crafted three distinct threshold criteria for substantiating purported affordances in communications research: (a) they are neither the object nor the feature of an object; (b) they are not an outcome; (c) they have variability. The authors also acknowledge an overt link with user agency and give the appropriate example of a smartphone, where the affordance does not lie in the device itself or its recording feature, but with the smartphone user with the agency to use it for better or worse (ibid, p. 39–40). Translating this to the realm of TikTok, one could argue that the affordance is not the app itself, nor its characteristic to provide algorithmically driven video content to its users based on previous behavior. Rather, the affordance lies in the agentic action of (news) content creators to (not) use certain features in videos, ranging from video to sound effects, overlays, and hashtags.

Bucher and Helmond (2018) have conceptualized the affordances of social media platforms by distinguishing high-level (“the kinds of dynamics and conditions enabled by technical devices, platforms and media”) and low-level affordances (“typically located in the materiality of the medium, in specific features, buttons, screens and platforms”; p. 239–240). Specifically focusing on news, Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger (2018) have identified six temporal affordances: immediacy and liveness (both referring to the instantaneous factor of news reporting), preparation time and extended retrievability (both related to the working conditions of journalists), and transience versus fixation in time (e.g. online liveblogs versus printed newspapers). Specifically for TikTok, Hautea et al. (2021) have established three key affordances: visibility, attained by using hashtags and appearing on users’ *For You* page; editability, with a custom-made video editor inside the TikTok app that “allows users to capture, alter, annotate, and combine video, sound, and images in novel ways”; and association, by consistently using similar hashtags, sounds and visual features (Hautea et al., 2021, p. 6).

Synthesizing the above, the remainder of this article will focus on how TikTok affords visibility, editability, and association as low-level and highly temporal affordances to its (news) content creators. This is broken into three categories: *visual*, *auditory*, and *hashtag* affordances. This categorization also highlights the limits and constraints publishers on TikTok face; in spite of its many functionalities (e.g. its unique option to “stitch,” allowing repurposing other users’ videos in one’s own as an example of visual affordances), the options to create visual elements, use sounds, and hashtags are limited, which scholarship argued has led to instances of self-censorship (Jing & Kaye, 2022). As all social media platforms are marked by multimodal affordances “at material, conceptual, and imaginary levels” (Hurley, 2019, p. 14), the editing and consumption patterns as well as algorithmic curation and visuality of video-centric platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have been highlighted as recurring affordances (Hase et al, 2023; Schellewald, 2023; Schreiber, 2017). This article builds on these conceptual insights to construct a multisided affordance framework for TikTok, highlighting the three key affordances unique to the platform in terms of editability, searchability, curation, and consumption. A visual example of the typology of affordances this article proposes is shown in Figure 2, a desktop printscreen of the



**Figure 2.** Desktop Printscreen of the Oldest Videos in the Data Set. The Video Caption Translates as “Aya Nakamura confides: “I am a Person Without a Filter””.

oldest video in the dataset. This was uploaded by the French private television broadcaster BFMTV on 25 February 2019. On the right side, the user-centric affordances are shown: at the time when the printscreen was taken (15 August 2023), the video had collected 6,949 likes and 25 comments. Users saved it 67 times and shared it with others 73 times. The rest of the printscreen shows the creator-centric affordances. The on-screen graphics show the text said by French singer Aya Nakamura (=visual affordances), two hashtags, in this case the singer’s name and one of her biggest hit songs, “Djadja” (=hashtag affordances), and the mentioning of the “son original” or original sound uploaded by BFMTV itself directly to the platform for usage in this and other of its videos (=auditory affordances).

First, TikTok’s *visual* affordances envelop previously established features such as on-screen text, native stickers, visual filters, framerate altering effects, and emoji. Following prior research on other platforms such as Instagram and YouTube (Azcona Sáenz et al., 2021; Hendrickx, 2021; Setyawan et al., 2023), this affordance includes the creation and use of video thumbnails, defined here as “still images that preview a

video” (see Figure 9). As Koh and Cui (2020) have argued, a successful thumbnail informs the audience about the content of the video and attracts their attention. The thumbnail, in turn, provides a glimpse into the editability of news. While thumbnails might not always be selected following a specific logic or strategy, they still include valuable information on the specific visual culture that is afforded by TikTok. Given TikTok’s visual culture, one could argue that this constitutes a useful avenue for studying the visual affordances on TikTok and other video-centric social media platforms. Related to this, see also the excellent meta-analysis of 72 empirical works studying visual and/or multimodal framing effects, highlighting “the increasing importance of images in multimodal media environments” (Geise & Xu, 2024, p. 9), also reflected in the incorporation of visual affordances in the study at hand.

Second, *auditory* affordances include the use of original, nonoriginal, or no sound in videos, ranging from regular sound effects to voice modulation and the use of either existing songs or original soundtracks as part of the video uploaded by users themselves. Sounds on TikTok are often used to connect content to popular trends and memes that can serve to boost searchability, visibility, and association (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). One relevant example is the use of news broadcasters’ known tune that is transferred to TikTok for the sake of recognizability and association, as is, for instance, apparent with the Austrian *ZiB* mentioned in this article’s introduction.

Third, *hashtag* affordances are operationalized through looking into the strings of text following the # symbol that also allow for searchability, visibility, and association (Hautea et al., 2021). Stemming from Twitter before finding their way to Instagram and now TikTok among other platforms, they have been mainly organizational in use, affording communities of people and so-called “ad hoc publics” to stay abreast of current affairs (Bruns & Burgess, 2011) while serving as “key objects which organize content” (Pearce et al., 2019, p. 3). Recent scholarship has indicated that using hashtags on TikTok cause content creators attempting to gain more traction and even virality using hashtags such as #foryoupage, #foryou, or #fyp (Zeng & Kaye, 2022).

The scholarly review and the proposed typology of news-related TikTok affordances culminate in the following research questions:

*RQ1: How do European news outlets present themselves visually on TikTok?*

*RQ2: How do European news outlets utilize sounds to connect to popular trends and memes on TikTok?*

*RQ3: How do European news outlets construct (journalistic) communities by using hashtags on TikTok?*

## **Methodological Framework**

While there is a growing popularity among scholars in employing digital methods to study TikTok, Kanthawala et al. (2022) in a structured literature review concluded that “most studies [. . .] utilized traditional methods such as surveys, interviews, or even content analyses, [and] there largely was no justification for the methodological decisions or explanation for why certain methods were appropriate for specific

studies” (p. 3110). Moreover, the existing digital methods approaches do not always build on “the dissimilar affordances of [TikTok] with regard to potential data collection,” as the authors argue that “researchers are not harnessing the pre-existing affordances of the platform to collect data” (pp. 3109–3110). Hence, this section sets out the argument for studying European news organizations on TikTok within the broader Digital Methods framework (Rogers, 2013, 2019), foregrounding the typology of TikTok affordances.

### *A Digital Methods Approach to the Study of TikTok*

Over the past decades, a wide range of methodologies has been proposed to leverage the substantial volumes of data generated by digital media devices within the social sciences, often referred to as digital or computational methods (Marres, 2017). Indeed, these approaches have gained increased potency with the emergence of sophisticated and accessible computational tools, enabling extensive data scraping and computational analysis. While computational and digital methods are at times used interchangeably, it is analytically beneficial to establish a distinction between the two. Whereas computational methods often refer to how data are captured and processed, especially in reference to the size of the data, Rogers (2013) differentiates the term *digital methods* as a critical way to build onto the “methods of the medium,” treating the various technological features of the medium as epistemic devices whereby the internet can collect, compute, sort, rank, and visualize data by itself (Lindgren, 2020). Within this approach to studying the digital domain, the central tenet is to refrain from extensive intervention and honoring the methods’ integrity to learn more about society. For example, as TikTok allows users to adopt thumbnails, sound templates, and specific hashtags, and these visual, auditory, and hashtag features in turn afford visibility, editability, and association. These features constitute methods for data extraction on which social scientists can build. Exploiting these preexisting medium-specific features and their usage help render visible various sociotechnical assemblages that may provide new insights into contemporary (journalistic) content production norms and practices.

To appropriately grasp said assemblages, a digital methods approach may employ computational techniques such as data scraping and computer-assisted analyses. In fact, digital methods approaches often involves what Lindgren (2020) has termed the “data piñata” approach in which one collects, for example, a wide variety of hashtags to then proceed “whacking” the data with a “stick,” that is, various analytical modules, in order to locate meaningful patterns or insights. The aim in this exploratory study is to capture relatively large-scale data concerning TikTok usage among European news brands and locate meaning patterns or insights into ways TikTok affords the news.

### *Computational Data Collection*

Following the digital methods approach, a repository of European news brands active on TikTok was created, building on the Digital News Report (DNR) 2022 which

presented insights into 47 news markets of which 23 were European<sup>1</sup> (Newman et al., 2022). For each country, all listed news outlets used and/or trusted by its citizens according to the survey were manually checked to verify if they were active on TikTok or not at the time of the analysis. Accounts which had not posted anymore in 2022 and which did not feature news content (e.g., various television networks' TikTok accounts with content of their regular programming) were discarded. This method led to a total of 91 accounts for further analysis, 42 of which are operated by print media, 29 by audiovisual media (of which 14 public and 14 private television broadcasters as well as one private radio broadcaster), and 20 digital-native outlets. A detailed overview of all outlets can be found in the publicly available repository here. The selection of news outlets was limited to the European continent for the sake of clarity and comparability. Including more outlets would have led the study too far and having this overt European focus helps to give the study a designated scope and contribution. However, it of course assumed that this broad case study and their findings and implications are also of relevance to non-European scholars and news outlets.

Next, TikTok videos were scraped using the Firefox extension “Zeeschuimer” as part of 4CAT: Capture & Analysis Toolkit, a computational toolkit developed within the digital methods initiative framework that facilitates large-scale data scraping and analysis available to social scientists concerned with online sociality (Peeters & Hagen, 2021). Scraping all content of the 91 European news brands yielded 26,473 videos posted between 25 February 2019, the year after TikTok launched globally (see Figure 2), and June 2022 as this was the initial time of the data collection period. The intention of this article is to outline trends in the first, formative wave of news outlets' activity on the platform. The “Zeeschuimer” extension captured a wide variety of variables for each of the posted videos. The metadata include “author,” “author\_followers,” “body,” or the main post text description, “timestamp” or the upload date, “music\_name” or the song title used in videos and “thumbnail\_url” or the designated link to video thumbnail images, and “hashtags” (see Figure 2). Finally, TikTok thumbnails were mapped through a random sample ( $n=15,000$ ) of the scraped thumbnail URLs as images for additional visual analysis. (4CAT only allowed downloading a maximum of 15,000 images at the time. Given this limitation, and in line with the general research goal, the presented visual analysis is, therefore, not meant to be taken as an exhaustive overview of styles and genres, but an explorative look at the visual trends as presented by European news brands on TikTok.)

### *Computational Data Analysis*

To understand how European news outlets adapt to the visual, auditory, and hashtag affordances on TikTok, different computational analyses were applied. In terms of *visual* affordances, the first analysis used the power of Yale DHLab's pretrained image analysis software PixPlot, to locate patterns in the thumbnails that European news brands use (Yale DHLab, 2020). PixPlot is an open-source analysis toolkit that uses “a pre-trained convolutional neural network for image captioning,” meaning that the Yale Digital Humanities Lab Team already trained their tool to “understand” images and

their possible relationships (YaleDHLab, 2020). PixPlot calculates the similarity between images, allowing the researcher to locate clusters or “hotspots” among large-scale image sets. In line with Lindgren (2020) and following Rogers’ (2021) visual media analysis, PixPlot helped to discover clusters intended to indicate how European news organizations present themselves visually on TikTok.

For the *auditory* affordances, one of TikTok’s defining features, the “music template,” was analyzed. Said template allows users to upload sounds to accompany videos, which can range from simple sound effects to full songs. Using the metadata “music\_name,” the various music templates that news organizations used by indicating their occurrence were mapped. If no specific template was used, the metadata would read “original sound.” Given that this label is adjusted based on the language of the news organization, meaning that for French content for instance the name changes to “son original” (see Figure 2), all language-based variants were clustered together under the “original sound label.” The analysis was directed toward preexisting song templates, as they indicate a clear genre and incorporation of TikTok’s auditory affordances.

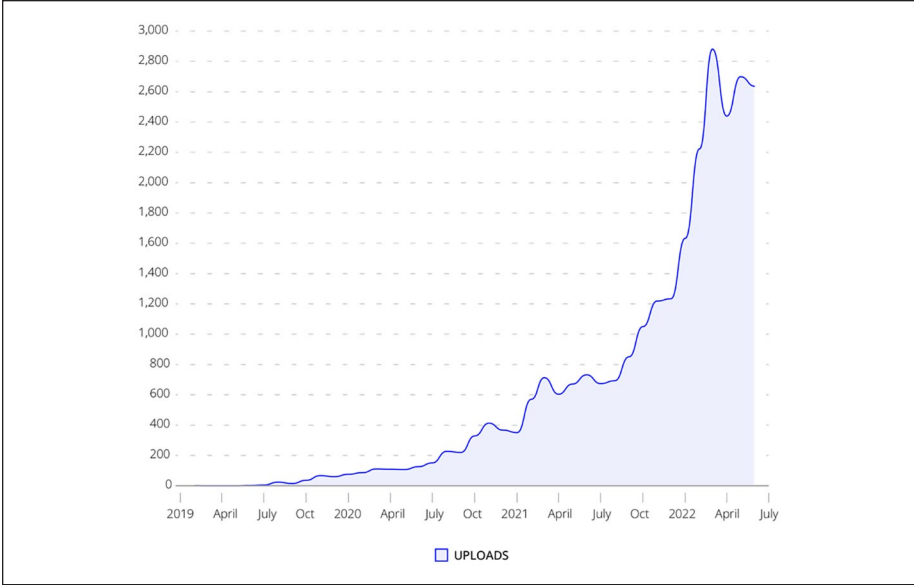
In terms of *hashtag* affordances, finally, the most frequent occurring hashtags were counted, both overall and over time. This gave a sense of the dominant hashtags as well as how long they “live” on the platform. In a next phase, a manual thematic analysis was carried out among the 100 most frequently used hashtags to interpret the most popular trends or topics news organizations follow to label their content. This is in line with previous research by Nelson (2020) and outlines key trends apparent in the hashtag usage of the European news outlets in the sample.

## Findings

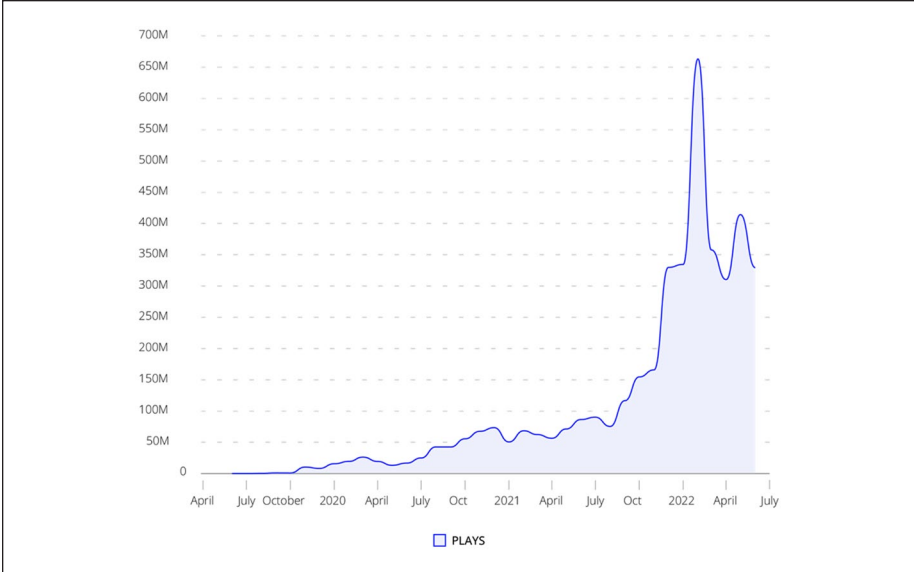
### *The Rise of TikTok Among European News Outlets*

This section outlines quantitative data derived from the dataset. It sets the scene for the further analyses on how news is afforded on TikTok through the videos shared by the assessed European news outlets. After the start in February 2019 (see Figure 2), Figure 3 outlines the number of monthly video uploads by all 91 outlets combined. A steady increase becomes apparent, with a peak in February 2022. Not coincidentally, this is the month wherein Russia invaded Ukraine, launching at the time of writing still ongoing war in the latter country. This led to a spike of nearly 3,000 TikTok videos uploaded in one month time, after numbers had been climbing rapidly in the preceding months as well. The hashtag analyses in ensuing sections of this article investigate this in more detail.

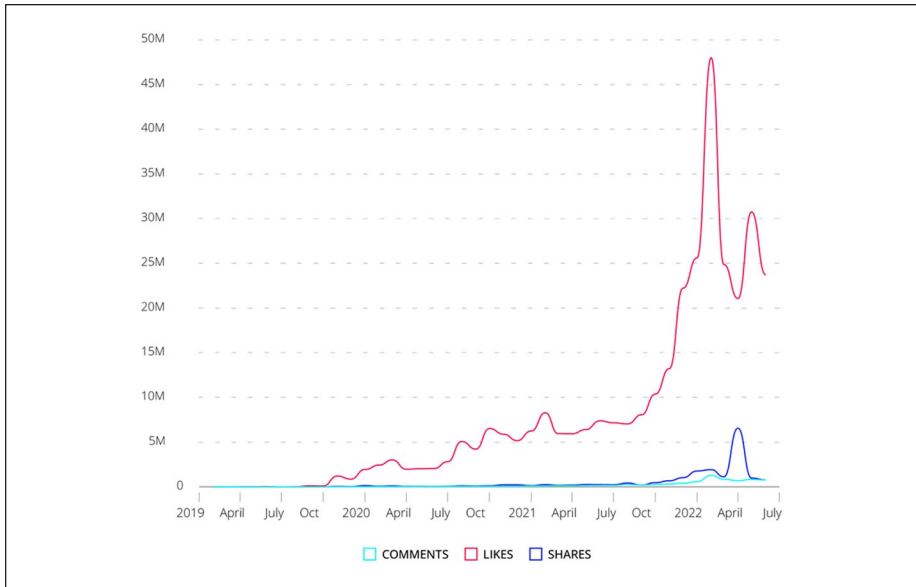
Figure 4 shows the total number of plays for all videos in the dataset, showing a remarkably similar curve in terms of exposure. Finally, as indicated in Figure 5, all videos uploaded in February 2022 had by July of that year reached a total of over 650 million views. The numbers of video likes and comments peaked along similar lines, but video shares were at its highest around April 2022. Based on the explorative



**Figure 3.** Overall Overview of Uploads of TikTok Content of European News Brands per Month.



**Figure 4.** Overall Overview of Plays of TikTok Content of European News Brands per Month.



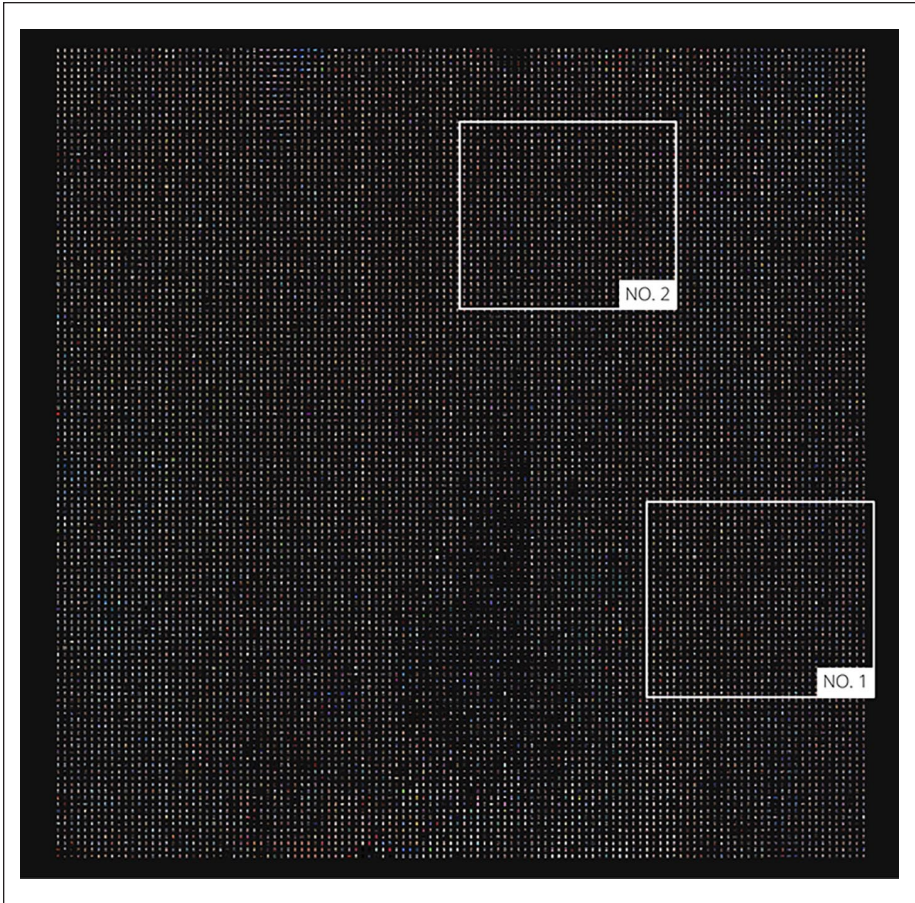
**Figure 5.** Overall Overview of Comments, Likes, and Shares of TikTok Content of European News Brands per Month.

nature of the study, it is unfortunately not possible to outline this in more detail, though fellow researchers are urged to further explore this in future work.

### Visual Affordances

Figure 6 presents a screenshot of the dynamic PixPlot image analysis of 15,000 thumbnails. Figures 7 and 8 are indicated within Figure 6 as No. 1 and No. 2, respectively, offering more fine-grained results.

PixPlot both categorizes and visualizes the images based on a pretrained algorithm that locates visual similarities. This yielded ten visual clusters of which two small ones can be ascribed to the broader category of objects, locations, or events (e.g., explosions, again linked to the outbreak of the Ukraine war in February 2022). The other eight clusters contain persons and most of the thumbnails have a single person in them. Figures 7 and 8 indicate two disparate yet poignant examples of this person-focused visual culture, with a highly visible cluster of mostly middle-aged white men in suits, ranging from news readers to (now former) British and Russian political leaders such as Boris Johnson and Vladimir Putin. PixPlot is unable to perfectly identify visible actors based on binary gender patterns, explaining why a few formally dressed women, such as French politician Marine Le Pen, also appear. Nevertheless, the personality-driven culture in video thumbnails (with either known politicians, celebrities, or journalists), clearly indicates that when it comes to visual affordances, the European news



**Figure 6.** Screenshot of a General Overview of a PixPlot Map Containing 15,000 Thumbnails of European News Brands' TikTok Videos.

outlets sampled choose to prioritize figures they assume audiences will know to attract bigger audiences and boast recognizability and relevance. This relevant finding on video thumbnails ties in with the view of Geise and Xu (2024, p. 19) that “visual content is of immense importance throughout the entire reception process,” highlighting “a significant responsibility for media practitioners in creating, selecting, checking, combining, and contextualizing these images.”

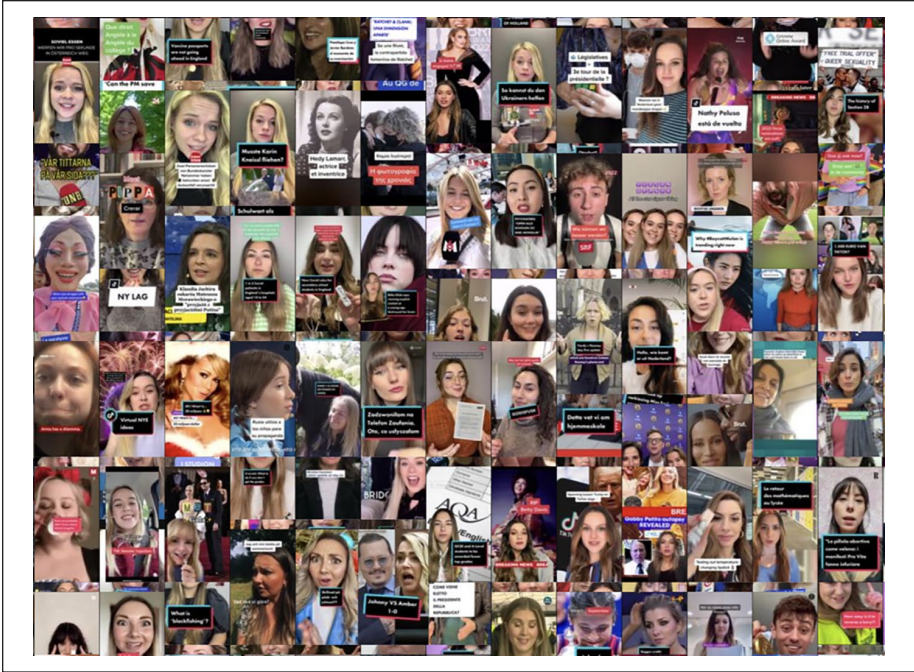
Figure 8 highlights an emerging trend within the vernacular nature of news dissemination. “Vernacular” is here and elsewhere in this article used in the sense established within folklore studies, emphasizing that news organizations operate in an environment shaped by the mediatization of grassroots efforts to produce “artistic creations, expressive events, or communities” (Blank, 2013, p. 121). Figure 8 further



**Figure 7.** Screenshot of a PixPlot Cluster with Predominantly White Men in Suits and Ties.

illustrates how news organizations are progressively integrating TikTok's narrative techniques while also emphasizing the role of their own traditional presenters or hosts in communicating news to audiences, akin to the role ascribed to known and trusted newsreaders in television news broadcasts. Notably, the analysis suggests a predominance of female presenters over male, although such observations are contingent upon the rather selective examination of thumbnails and are interpreted within a binary gender framework. Furthermore, the figure underscores a convergence of visual aesthetics across various news brands, indicating a strategic alignment in their presentation approach. Even though also celebrities such as Billie Eilish, Johnny Depp, and Amber Heard are also featured, another relevant observation is the presence of text in thumbnails, intended to again inform audiences on the content of videos.

The juxtaposition between the (predominantly yet not solely) male and female clusters highlights the highly gendered nature of TikTok's news environment. This phenomenon seems to be directly related to the platform's editability affordance, as young



**Figure 8.** Screenshot of PixPlot Cluster with Predominantly Female Content Creators.

female journalists as hosts predominantly utilize the overlay function to superimpose themselves onto news footage, embodying not only the traditional newsreader but also the influencer aesthetic and thus aligning with TikTok’s logic as well as broader journalistic and social media logics. This presents an intriguing hypothesis worthy of closer future research.

In addition to this gendered vernacular culture, some outlets in our sample use the color schemes and other characteristics of logos and branding of traditional television news broadcasts. While Austria’s *ZiB* is a prime example (see the Introduction), other brands have created their own designated style and formatting for TikTok videos specifically, including bright colors, text overlays, and stickers. Some accounts, such as Slovakia’s digital-native outlet Refresher, use the same colors prevalent in the TikTok logo in an overt attempt to interweave its news content more seamlessly in the flow among other media content for its target audience (Figure 9).

### *Auditory Affordances*

Besides visual features such as thumbnails, TikTok allows its content creators to incorporate song templates as audio into their video content. Table 1 presents the ten most used templates for news brands on TikTok, excluding the “original sound label.”

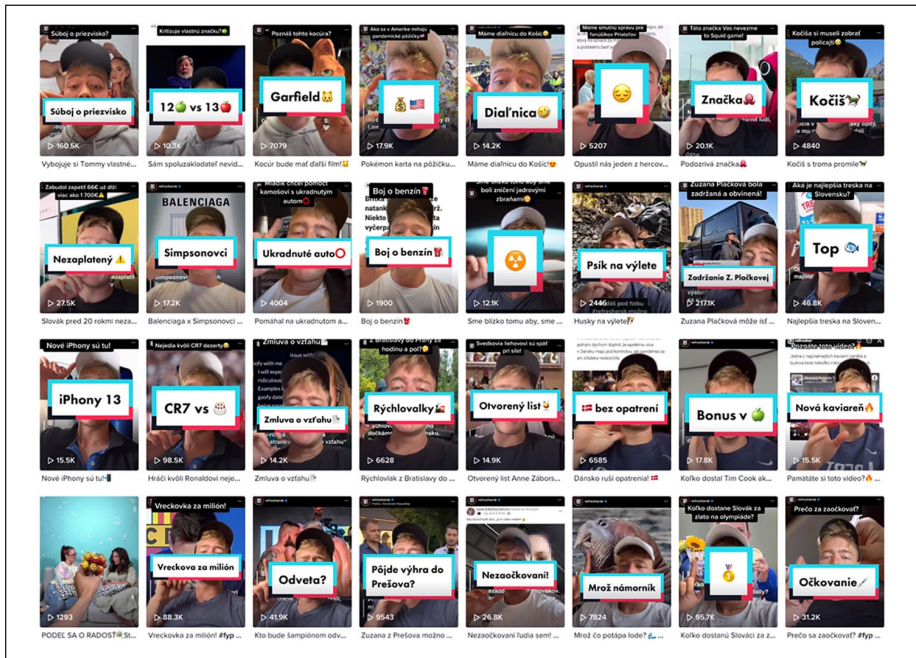


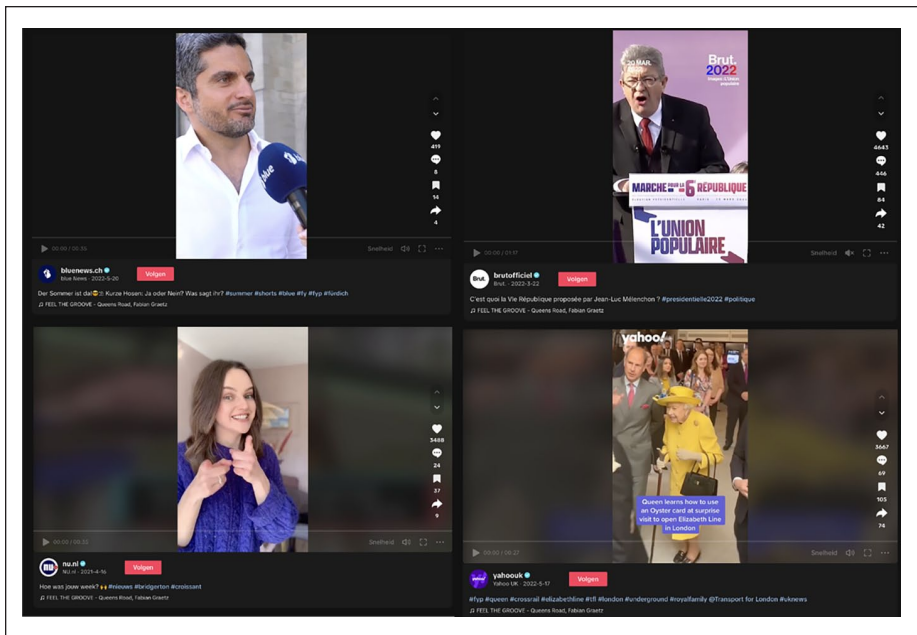
Figure 9. Collection of Slovakia's Refresher TikTok Video Thumbnails.

Thus, very few organizations appear to actively use song templates. In fact, most of them use “original sound” as their “music,” meaning the sound of the video that is produced by the organization itself.<sup>2</sup> This signals that news organizations do not use this regularly to get TikTok’s algorithm to link their content to specific vernacular trends. Exceptions to this general practice are templates such as “FEEL THE GROOVE,” in which various news outlets apply a catchy and “groovy” sound to report on range of issues such as summer outfits, weekly news updates, French Presidential elections, and the activities of the (now late) Queen Elizabeth II (Figure 10). This indicates that its use is limited yet widespread across outlets from several countries, constituting a relevant finding for how European news outlets utilize sounds in their TikTok news videos.

The use of a uniform sound template underscores a fascinating convergence in news production, where diverse news genres are delivered using the same musical motif. While the lack of popular sound templates might not be surprising given that sound templates are relatively new and unique, requiring more thought and awareness on how to incorporate it in news production, a relevant finding is that some news outlets use sound templates developed for “news” content with tracks such as “News23 News / Incident / Suspense(900450)” or simply “news,” predominantly used by the aforementioned Austrian public broadcaster’s TV news broadcast *ZiB* followed by British and Belgian newspapers *The Telegraph* and *HLN.be*. Other media, such as the British television news channel GB News, have produced their own TikTok sound, in this case appropriately titled “GB News Theme.”

**Table 1.** Most Popular Sound Templates Used in TikTok Videos in our Sample.

Song Template	Frequency
FEEL THE GROOVE	133
Lazy Sunday	81
News23 News/Incident/Suspense(900450)	71
Swear By It	67
Pieces (Solo Piano Version)	66
Stargazing	64
River Flows in You	59
Suns	50
r&b loop	50



**Figure 10.** Collection of News Outlets from Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom Using the FEEL THE GROOVE Sound Template.

### Hashtag Affordances

The final analysis zooms in on the incorporation of hashtags by news organizations to position and “sell” their content. A total of 24,175 different hashtags were used in the total dataset. A longtail becomes apparent with the overwhelming majority of those ( $n = 22,855$ ) used ten times or less. A manual coding was carried out of the top 100 most recurring hashtags in videos retrieved from the 91 news outlets’ accounts in our sample, all used between 133 and 4,519 times, as this is considered to be the

**Table 2.** Typology of Hashtags in European TikTok News Videos.

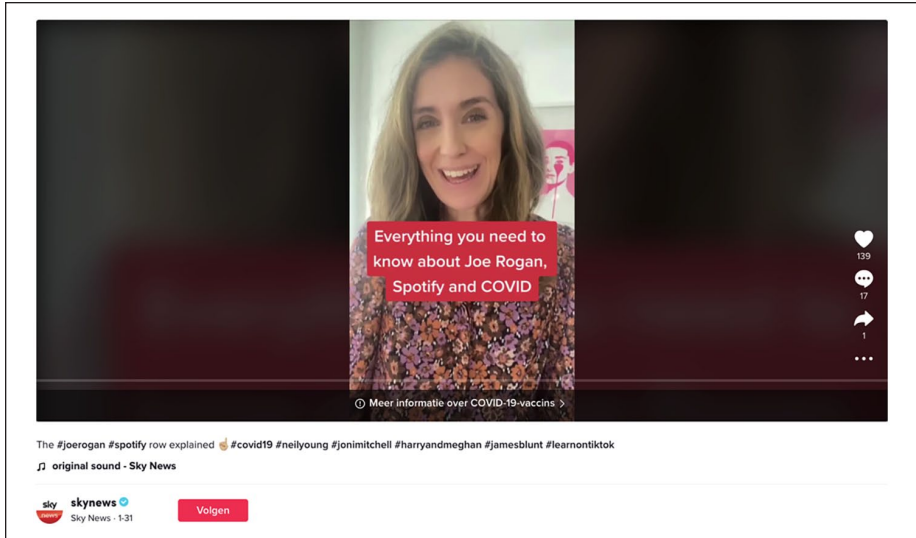
Type of Hashtag	Frequency (n (%))	Examples
Viral	13,519 (29.3%)	#foryou, #foryoupage, #fyp, #lol, #viral
News	13,204 (28.6%)	#covid19, #info, #news, #ukraine, #war
Brands	8,674 (18.8%)	#24sata (Croatia), #aftonbladet (Sweden), #nunl (Netherlands), #onet (Poland), #tagesschau (Germany)
Country-specific	7,991 (17.3%)	#magyar (Hungary in Hungarian), #presidentielle2022, #schweiz (Switzerland in German), #srbija (Serbia in Serbian), #ukpolitics
Education	2,821 (6.1%)	#tiktokacademie, #learnontiktok, #aprendecontiktok, #lernenmittiktok

best approach to gauge recurring trends and logics across accounts and countries (Nelson, 2020). Based on the most frequently used hashtags, a classification of five types of hashtags is derived, along with their frequency and characteristics, as shown in Table 2.

Viral hashtags are slightly more prevalent than actual news ones, indicating that European news organizations clearly adhere to the affordances of TikTok in terms of hashtags used. The top five of most commonly used hashtags was #fyp ( $n=4,519$ ), #news (1,980), #ukraine (1,907; yet again obviously skewed by the outbreak of the war in February 2022), #foryou (1,793) and #viral (1,391). Here, it is noteworthy that 15 of our 91 accounts originated in the United Kingdom and Ireland, the only two nations in our corpus which have English as native tongue. This helps to contextualize that the use of popular hashtags in English, both viral and news ones, goes far beyond English-native news organizations and their subsequent TikTok videos, indicating even more far-reaching attempts to attain virality and globalized audiences in spite of content produced in a myriad of languages.

To further contextualize this, an example is given by looking into the hashtags of TikTok videos shared by British tabloid newspaper *The Daily Mail*. Along with various news outlets, it frequently uses localized variations of the “#learnonTikTok” hashtag. The hashtags employed by *The Daily Mail* (e.g., #dadsoftiktok, #toddlersoftiktok, and #animalsoftiktok) reflect its adoption of specific vernacular trends. This raises important questions about the extent to which *The Daily Mail* seeks to deliver actual news content to its TikTok audience (see Vásquez-Herrero et al., 2022, which found that less than half of all videos shared constituted news—a further elaboration of this in this article would lead too far astray from its explorative nature). At least within these hashtag communities, *The Daily Mail* appears to align more closely with TikTok’s vernacular culture as a strategy to boost its visibility.

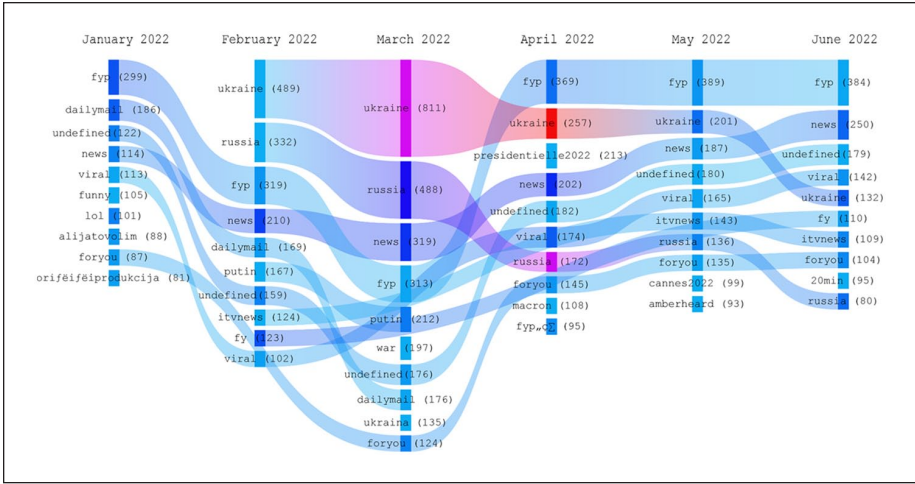
This strategy, which appeals to grassroots efforts, can be juxtaposed with the adoption of the #learnonTikTok content communities in different languages. The hashtag #learnonTikTok was launched by TikTok in 2020, and it has been argued that



**Figure 11.** Screenshot of TikTok Post by Sky News Using #learnontiktok.

“TikTok’s #LearnOnTikTok campaign catalyzed the professionalization of knowledge creation on TikTok” (Zeng, 2023). Other scholars have highlighted how the adoption of this hashtag has increased perceptions of authenticity (Smout, 2023). Table 2 reveals how this trend has been successfully integrated in the videos the sampled news organizations, being used nearly 3,000 times. The hashtag #learnontiktok ( $n = 852$ ) is particularly popular among British news accounts (see Figure 11), with localized adaptations in German (#lernenmitTikTok), Spanish (#aprendenconTikTok and #aprendeenTikTok), and Italian (#imparaconTikTok). Notably, the Italian news outlet República has even incorporated the trend into its branding with the hashtag #imparaConRepública.

Figure 12 shows a RankFlow graph of the most recurring hashtags for the first 6 months of 2022, to indicate how following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, news organizations massively posted about the country in February and March of that year using its name as a hashtag in various languages and complemented with #russia, #war and #putin. In the following months, though, a return to normalcy rapidly became clear, with the virality-aspiring #fyp returning as the most popular hashtag from April 2022 onward already. During this month, other recurring hashtags include #presidentielle2022 and #macron, relating to the French presidential elections occurring in that month and, unsurprisingly, overwhelmingly used by French TikTok news channels. For May 2022, a significant number of TikTok news videos were devoted to the controversial trial of actors Johnny Depp and Amber Heard. These examples clearly show how traditional agenda setting and gatekeeping principles firmly embedded in traditional news media production also find their way to the realm of TikTok, although



**Figure 12.** Top 10 Hashtags Per Month (January–June 2022) with Size Based on Frequency of Occurrence with Color Gradient Based on Change in Relation to previous Month (red = high levels of change, blue = low levels of change). (One limitation of the computational analysis is that the computational analysis gave a blank result for what has been termed “undefined.” It might be that this is an unreadable hashtag.)

arguably to a lesser extent and inferior to other hashtags intended to attract wide audiences beside specific news topics.

## Discussion and Conclusion

### TikTok and Hybridity

In their recent, critical work of how the concept of hybridity has been approached and incorporated in journalism studies, Hallin et al. (2023) argue that hybridity operates cyclically, as norms and conventions of previous media and journalism forms feed into the newer ones. Thus, hybridity is not eliminated but rather stabilized; change is constant across time and space and similar patterns of resisting, experimenting, and adopting reoccur. From this vantage point, the study findings are relayed to the study by Hase et al. (2023). In their assessment of German news outlets selecting and adapting news for distribution via various social media platforms, the authors “find little evidence for news being adjusted in line with platform logics, at least on the level of journalistic content” (p. 1514), nuancing the debate on the platformization of news. While outstanding in its own right, their study is a content analysis looking at the topics that are more or less prevalent to being shared across social media platforms. Furthermore, the authors’ dataset only included four TikTok posts (p. 1508). This study’s conceptual and theoretical frameworks specifically looked at three distinct levels of affordances that, when combined, are unique to TikTok. Its aim was not to

investigate the actual news content or topics, but rather the extent to which European news publishers adhere to the distinct affordances of TikTok.

Following the “hybridity cycle” (Hallin et al., 2023), the news outlets in the vast study sample are found to embrace some of TikTok’s key affordances in their video production and dissemination. They adhere predominantly to visual affordances by creating designated thumbnails which can be considered as integrated within the color schemes of TikTok as a platform and/or the news outlets’ own branding across platforms. Evidence is also found for hashtag affordances by means of seeking virality (#fyp, #foryoupage), active self-promotion (by using their own outlets as a hashtag) and news-related hashtags (#covid19, #ukraine) based on current events at the time of publishing videos in TikTok’s acknowledged vernacular culture. This has various implications. First, the urge for virality expressed through hashtags ties in with adhering to topical and rapidly changing trends, which are ultimately intended to gather more views for single videos. Second, these efforts of individual news outlets’ personal branding within the confinements of TikTok can also be considered as an extension of outlets engaging with any new platform, and thus as a continuation of long-standing standards in the media industry to follow increasingly agentic citizens to the media platforms they seek out (Hendrickx, 2022). Third, this evolution is a logical continuation of affordance theory for newer platforms with their own opportunities, contingencies, and constraints as well as, again, the cyclical nature of hybridity (Hallin et al., 2023) wherein change is always imminent.

### *TikTok and Social Media and Journalistic Logics*

However, the results also reveal a lack of enthusiasm for experimenting with TikTok’s unique auditory feature. News organizations did not frequently partake in the many grassroots viral trends (songs, dance routines) that TikTok’s vernacular culture stimulates. Given the speed with which TikTok’s users move from one video to the next, news content needs to blend in visually with other content on the platform. Here, many European news organizations were found to feature either known figures (politicians, celebrities) or young and often female journalists as “TikTokers” who are juxtaposed literally in front of the news to explain to the audience what is happening in the world, combining elements of traditional television broadcasts’ news anchors as well as influencers. This confirms and further contextualizes previous findings on the mixed role dispositions journalists ascribe to themselves and are ascribed by audiences on TikTok and other social media platforms (e.g. Degen et al., 2024; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2023).

These findings constitute valuable empirical evidence of news outlets attempting to walk the tightrope of managing both social media and news logics in their native-bound reporting (Hendrickx & Vásquez-Herrero, 2024; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Hence, this article argues that we are currently witnessing a novel, distinct type of confluence of traditional news and contemporary social media values and affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Hendrickx, 2023) as news titles becoming TikTok content creators tend to integrate their own designated logos and graphics in their TikTok videos to boost visibility and association as well as affinity with their other, more traditional

news content (Hautea et al., 2021). Furthermore, in terms of video uploads and engagement numbers, the activities of news publishers and their audiences have steadily increased over the past few years and peaked in the final period of this analysis, the first half of 2022. Figures from the Digital News Report, which in 2024 clearly presented increases in terms of total use and use for news specifically (Newman et al., 2024), tend to indicate that this is likely to have increased further. With more news brands adopting TikTok and more (young) users utilizing the platform as a gateway to news consumption, this warrants additional scholarly attention.

### *TikTok and Its Dependency*

By using TikTok and other platforms such as Facebook and Instagram as important diffusion platforms, news organizations risk becoming too dependent on them for reach and traffic, particularly as “algorithmic social media and audience analytics platforms simultaneously shape, constrain, and obfuscate individual agency due to a desire to inform and/or study mass audiences” (Hendrickx, 2022, p. 1369). Yet, when audiences shift to new digital platforms, media organizations and scholars alike are bound to attempt to follow them to either attract new audiences or to study how this occurs. For instance, a 2024 Reuters Institute Report ranked WhatsApp as the platform that news publishers want to put more effort into, with TikTok coming in second (Newman, 2024). However, when it comes to highlighting this dependency, one must also recognize this from the vantage point of researchers. As Montag et al. (2021, p. 2) appropriately note, TikTok “has been criticized with respect to data protection issues/privacy, spreading hate and might serve as a platform engendering Cyberbullying.” News organizations and researchers alike ought to maintain consistent caution in all too overtly either adapting to or adopting the peculiarities and temperaments of a platform that has rightfully received its fair share of criticism, with at the time of submitting this manuscript national ban of the platform in various countries seriously considered by lawmakers.

### *TikTok and Its Audience*

In their study on a decade of research on social media and journalism, Lewis and Molyneux (2018) argue that “scholars too often have overlooked the gendered toxicity, the intra-journalistic insularity, and the overwhelming power of platform companies” (p. 19). In this light, future research on TikTok affordances can take a more qualitative outlook and seek to contextualize what pushes and pulls users from engaging with news content on TikTok and other platforms (see for instance Hendrickx, 2024; Swart & Broersma, 2023). This can help to gain more insights on how people use and perceive news on TikTok, which is pertinent for media research and industries alike. Looking at the creator-centric affordances, fellow researchers are recommended to operationalize the available dataset in this article to carry out more fine-grained analyses of TikTok videos to build on the explorative findings outlined here. Following the three types of affordances proposed, studying the causes of the acknowledged

prevalence of mostly female hybrid news readers/influencers explaining the news in videos (visual affordances), how news outlets construct their own sound libraries to supplement their video content (auditory affordances) and the extent to which the used hashtags constitute deliberate choices by content creators and what their intentions are, caught between the search for virality and seriousness as a news publisher (hashtag affordances).

### *Limitations*

Ultimately, when carrying out this type of large-scale computational analysis with images, one must acknowledge the issue of computational power and inherent biases. A digital methods approach entails a plethora of computer-assisted data collection and analysis tools that aid researchers in making sense of large amounts of digital data such as found on TikTok. For example, social scientists can now relatively easily scrape thousands of images or large bodies of text and use various algorithms (e.g., machine learning) to locate patterns in datasets. This practice has been argued in detail by Lindgren (2020) in his book *Data Theory*. However, as Lindgren points out, the goal of using such computer-assisted analyses is not necessarily to take them as definitive evidence for a predetermined research question. Rather, from a more interpretative framework, it is more productive to view these tools as powerful assistants that help explore the data and find meaningful patterns that might have been overlooked given preexisting beliefs or aims of the researcher. Building on this argument, the digital methods approach by using the 4CAT: Capture & Analysis Toolkit (Peeters & Hagen, 2021) was operationalized, mainly to map a general field and locate meaningful patterns that form fruitful paths for further research into understanding news production and consumption on TikTok. This exploratory study has closely followed the imperative to critically *think along with* the logic of social media platforms and computational tools (Rogers, 2013, p. 1), in this case TikTok, as a first basis for discovering important trends that prove useful starting points for further analysis and validation by building on more tailored computational approaches and in depth qualitative exploration.

Every study has its limitations, as does the one at hand. The scope was limited to European TikTok channels operated by the most used and/or trusted news brands according to the Digital News Report 2022, as to observe specific trends within the continent and to keep our dataset manageable. While the European context poses its own specificities such as the overall combination of strong public and private broadcasters, it is expected that the findings of this study in terms of visual, auditory, and hashtag affordances are largely transferable to other regions and markets beyond the European sphere. More and bigger cross-country studies are necessary to put this hypothesis to the test. Nevertheless, at the time of writing the study in the article at hand is the largest one in terms of size and scope for its integration of 91 news outlets from 23 different countries, an argument in favor of likely transferability. This article does not claim that this approach paints the full picture of news consumption through TikTok; an admittedly normative perspective was adopted by limiting the dataset to

news organizations from the DNR. Along similar lines, this study is unable to make statements about the content of the videos as it is not a content analysis in terms of news themes or narratives, but rather an investigation into the adoption of TikTok's unique combination of platform-specific affordances.

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### ORCID iD

Jonathan Hendrickx  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2802-2802>

### Notes

1. The full list of countries includes Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. At least one TikTok channel from each of these countries was retrieved and subsequently assessed.
2. When ranking the most used song templates, the first 13 on the list (before FEEL THE GROOVE) all show to the usage of "original sound": original sound (8,517; English), son original (3,828; French), Originalton (2,125; German), sonido original (1,014; Spanish), (origineel geluid (994; Dutch), originalljud (658; Swedish), původní zvuk (531; Czech), eredeti hang (320; Hungarian), dźwięk oryginalny (270; Polish), alkuperäinen ääni (265; Finnish), orijinal ses (241; Turkish), suono originale (208; Italian), som original (201; Portuguese), leading to a total  $n$  of 19,145. This total does not include all the "original sounds" in all languages.

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## Author Biography

**Jonathan Hendrickx** is Assistant Professor in Media Studies at the University of Copenhagen (Denmark). His mixed-methods work focuses on the rise of social media journalism and the diversity of news in the light of increased media ownership consolidation. Hendrickx obtained his PhD in Media and Communication Studies at Vrije Universiteit Brussel in 2021 and worked at the Journalism Studies Center of the University of Vienna as a Postdoctoral Researcher. His work was published in leading journals including *Digital Journalism*, *New Media & Society* and *Journalism: Theory and Practice*.