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Is TikTok News Less “News-Like”? Investigating News Organizations’ Stories on TikTok and Their Alignment/Divergence with Traditional News Values, Norms, Routines, and Roles

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ABSTRACT

TikTok is increasingly used by young people to obtain the news, and news organizations have utilized it to reinvent themselves to reach millions of followers. There are concerns, however, that news on TikTok is more sensationalist and frivolous, and hinders journalism from playing its public service role. This study investigates if established legacy news organizations adapting to TikTok logics have indeed unanchored their news from traditional news values, norms, routines and roles and whether or not that is concerning, through a content analysis of 200 TikTok videos produced by 10 leading news organizations on that platform. Results show these news outlets continuing to adhere to their news agendas to present stories on both hard and soft news topics relevant to their audiences. There is also, notably, a tendency towards increasing the shareability of stories, where narratives feature a “human interest” element to focus on human impacts and appeal to emotions. That said, stories have mostly seen journalists remain objective, and transparent in revealing their sources and processes. Of concern however is news on TikTok tending to present singular sides to stories. More should also be done to feature voices of ordinary people; “government” continues to be their most cited source.


KEYWORDS

TikTok; news values; journalistic norms; journalistic routines; professional roles; boundary work

Introduction

TikTok has become a social media platform increasingly favoured by young people as a source of news and information, emerging in 2018 and rapidly gaining 1.9 billion users globally by 2023 (GillPress 2023). This platform’s appeal lies in its short video format, allowing users to upload videos they have produced of up to 10 minutes long, and embellishing them with music, voiceovers, stickers, and text, among others (TikTok

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n.d.), to increase their chances of going viral. Users of TikTok are also targeted with content they like, based on the platform's algorithm (TikTok 2020).

Such characteristics have made this platform a hit with young people (Hutchinson 2022; Owen 2023). The Digital News Report (2024) published by the Reuters Institute revealed that 23% of younger audiences aged 18 to 24 obtain their news from TikTok. In the US in particular, TikTok is the only platform that has seen a five-fold increase in users who consume news on it, from 3% in 2020 to 17% in 2024, amid declining or stagnant news consumption numbers on other social media platforms (Leppert and Matsu 2024). News organizations have, in turn, sat up and paid attention. No longer seen as a platform for just "light news" (Kersley 2022), TikTok has become a place where established news outlets are growing their audience base.

Despite this, there are still concerns that TikTok news might be "sensationalist" (Floreani 2023) or "frivolous" (Keselj 2020). Previous studies by Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and López-García (2022) and Hase, Boczek, and Scharrow (2023) had focused on whether news on TikTok was adhering more to social media logics of personalization, interactivity, engagement, etc.; no research has yet centred on journalism's long-established news values, norms, routines and roles to determine if and to what extent news outlets on TikTok continue to abide by them and what this means for journalism in the long run.

This paper seeks to answer that through a content analysis of 200 TikTok news videos produced by 10 of the most prominent news organizations on that platform with the highest follower counts, including CNN, BBC, Sky News, and ABC News. These news organizations have the strongest global presence on TikTok, making them notable case studies to examine.

The Growing Popularity (and Concerns) of TikTok as News Provider

TikTok first began as a mobile application for user-generated content when it was launched by Chinese company Bytedance in 2018 (Omar and Wang, 2020; Kersley 2022); it is known for being the international version of Bytedance's mobile short video platform in China called Douyin (Kaye, Chen, and Zeng 2021).

From the beginning, TikTok was recognized for the short-form lip syncing and dance content produced by its users using its vast database of songs (Tidy and Galer 2020). Users would typically "participate in TikTok in order to express themselves, interact with others, and escape from day-to-day pressure" (Omar and Wang 2020, 130). This has drawn in large swathes of young audiences, preferring to "consume content in rich video formats" that are characterized as "raw, high-energy, and deeply engaging" (Muliadi 2020).

News organizations have, in turn, seen TikTok as an avenue to reinvent themselves and their offerings and reach out to a younger audience. This comes amid trying times as they experience falling revenues and a declining pool of paying subscribers (Wu, Tandoc, and Salmon 2019). As it is, 49% of top news publishers across 44 markets, including in North and South America, Europe, and Asia, have started TikTok accounts and are regularly posting content there (Newman 2022).

The pull of TikTok for these news organizations has also been related to their desires to "provide reliable news, amid fears about widespread misinformation"

(Newman 2022, 4). Having a presence on that platform would allow them to disseminate news that they have themselves fact-checked to be accurate and true. Additionally, TikTok would add to their presence on social media apps, ensuring that they are reaching all audiences consuming news on the go.

Obtaining news from TikTok has also become more attractive for users of the platform. According to Vázquez-Herrero et al. (2022), TikTok news appeals to people's increasing penchant for finding information quickly that is "useful, interesting and fun to know" (1720). Additionally, TikTok offers news consumers an alternative to "conventional news", according to the former Reuters Institute director Rasmus Nielsen, giving them "more personality-based, participatory, and personalised options" (Ng 2023). Similarly, Faria (2022, 55) pointed out that "most people see [TikTok] as a younger and more up-to-date type of journalism, dynamic, laid-back but creative and accurate at the same time, with a format that allows the transmission of a lot of complex information in simplified communication." Keselj (2020) echoes this view, noting that TikTok has become "a growing space for political activism, education, and commentary."

Indeed, the rise of TikTok as a news provider may be placed within the larger trend of "social media journalism", where journalistic content becomes tailored to respective platforms, with increasing importance placed on "audience engagement, user expectations, and popularity metrics" (Degen et al. 2024, 413). Social media's technical affordances have also influenced the types of news produced, with more focus on interactive and audiovisual news content (Harcup and O'Neill 2017). Additionally, communication styles may shift to focus on humour, storytelling and rhetoric (Mourão et al. 2016); Mellado and Hermida (2021) discuss journalists potentially aligning themselves more with the roles of promoter, celebrity, and joker. Hurcombe (2024, 2) also notes the role of "newsfluencers" who "produce news content for participatory audiences" – these individuals such as Youtubers and TikTokers have become an increasingly important means for young audiences to obtain news online, allowing them to keep abreast of current events and topics. This highlights that hard and soft news should not be seen as binary – both may be avenues through which debate on important issues may be had, despite news adopting a more "tabloid" nature (Turner 1999, 63).

That said, TikTok as a news provider has drawn concerns. It has been known to contribute to fake news spread, largely disseminated through TikTok's algorithms (Tucker 2022); reliance on audiences as a first line of defence to fact-check and report falsehoods to the platform may also yield low effectiveness, given a slew of reasons that dissuade them from doing so, such as a lack of subject interest and knowledge, and perceptions that the post would not cause severe enough harm (Wu, 2024a).

Additionally, the short video format for the delivery of news has meant that video clips might only reflect a part of the whole story, thereby leaving out important context (Wong 2022). Indeed, focus might be placed on grabbing attention and latching onto "social hotspots" rather than reflecting actual news facts (Li et al. 2022). Such concerns had emerged similarly in the 1990s and 2000s, when scholars like Kurtz (1993) discussed how tabloidization of the news meant a decrease of hard news like politics and economics and an increase in soft news involving scandal,

sensation and entertainment, potentially contributing to a decline in journalistic quality.

Additionally, TikTok's "For You" page is operated by an algorithmic system that shows users the types of videos that they would be inclined to view (Gao, Liu, and Gao 2023). Such algorithmic systems may expose audiences to a narrower spectrum of content, described as "filter bubbles" that "inadvertently amplify ideological segregation by automatically recommending content an individual is likely to agree with" (Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016, 299). Relatedly, videos that do well in such algorithmic systems tend to be tied to the lighter categories of "comedy, education, beauty, and sports" (TikTok 2023) or to viral content related to sensationalist news or conspiracy theories (Floreani 2023). In order to increase the visibility and engagement with their content then, there is concern that news organizations might "lean into more controversial takes and opinions" (Hutchinson 2022). This might risk them trivializing their news or polarizing opinions about issues, undermining the creation of a properly informed citizenry.

Dominant Definitions of News and Journalism: How Does TikTok News Compare?

Journalism and the news that it produces have traditionally played an integral role in society, supplying information to the public as a "medium of education, enlightenment and entertainment" and enabling citizens to become "participant[s] in public life and political debate" (McNair 2005, 28). To do that, the production of news is tied to "distinct professional norms" such as ethical guidelines, practical routines, and standards of newsworthiness, and adopts roles that have a "public service orientation" (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 35–36). Journalists must also develop "a core knowledge and set of competencies" to produce the news (Örnebring 2019, 1); journalism students are taught skills such as writing, reporting and editing, and professional values of journalism such as ethics, objectivity and journalistic rights and responsibilities as part of their education (Johansen, Weaver, and Dornan 2001; Vos 2012).

The professionalization of journalism has seen journalists gain the authority to "exercise something like professional expertise in determining the news of the day" and "proper journalism" has become bound to the provision of independent, factual and verifiable news that works in the interest of the public (Nerone 2013, 450–451). This has allowed journalism to establish clear boundaries, described by Carlson and Lewis (2019, 123) as "boundary work", allowing journalism to "be demarcated from non-journalism, journalists from non-journalists." Such boundaries give to journalists greater control of their profession and increase the legitimacy of their craft.

That said, with the entrance of new technologies, actors, and journalistic forms, the nature of journalism has shifted. The "language and logic" of social media platforms seem to prioritize the growth of "visibility and virality" (Negreira-Rey et al. 2022, 148). This relates to literature on the "platformization" of the news, where news outlets adapt the news they produce to logics of the platforms they are on; these logics are tied to affordances of the platform, where a range of actions may be performed due to the platform's features (Bucher and Helmond 2018). News

organizations are increasingly optimizing their content to suit these platforms and their algorithms, recognizing their dependency on these distribution channels for audience numbers and revenue (Meese and Hurcombe 2021). Journalists are now needing to “navigate a tension between the seriousness at the heart of journalism’s normative self-description and the playfulness of much news content” (Carlson and Lewis 2019, 127). The boundaries of journalism, as they are traditionally conceived, have become increasingly blurred in this “hybrid communication ecosystem” where actors and audiences have multiplied and transformed, new channels and formats have emerged, and media consumption habits have changed (Negreira-Rey et al. 2023, 4).

Indeed, existing research seems to suggest that news on TikTok may look different from how “news” has been traditionally conceived. In their study of 159 TikTok videos produced by NBC News and CBS News in 2020, Chobanyan and Nikolskaya (2021) found that news on TikTok seemed to stress “sensation, shortness, and fun”, where the news moves away from being in-depth and serious, professionally voiced by reporters and anchors and professional video-editing techniques to focus instead on “dynamics and entertainment” (84). Similarly, Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and López-García (2022) pointed to news media on TikTok assuming the dynamics of TikTok, defined mainly by trending hashtags, participation in viral trends or challenges and the tagging of popular sounds, to increase the reach of their own content. Additionally, Negreira-Rey, Vázquez-Herrero, and López-García (2022) looked at journalist accounts on TikTok to analyze how they adapted to that platform and found that many of them sought to create a personal brand and increase visibility with new audiences. That said, in a study by Hase, Boczek, and Scharrow (2023), it was discovered that news outlets did not strategically adapt news to social media platforms, hence indicating weak evidence of platformization of news.

At this point, no one has yet examined if news produced by news outlets on TikTok has indeed unanchored itself from the news values, norms, routines and roles that constitute traditional “news” and if this shift may signal potential points of concern.

In terms of definition, **news values** such as prominence, relevance, magnitude and timeliness help to determine if an event or news actors would qualify as newsworthy and influence what journalists choose to include and what to exclude from the news of the day (Harcup and O’Neill 2017). **Norms** are crucial to the shaping of expectations and behaviours of journalists, and influence how they practice journalism (Jenkins and Tandoc 2019), such as the ideological goal of journalists to be objective and neutral in their news reports (Deuze 2005), and transparent and accountable in their reporting (Tandoc and Oh 2017). **Routines** refer to “those patterned, routinized, repeated practices and norms that media workers use to do their jobs” (Shoemaker and Reese 1996, 100), such as framing to highlight the salience of certain pieces of information (Entman 1993), focusing on certain key topics to keep the people informed, such as politics, economics, social issues, and science (Karlsson 2016; Vermeer et al. 2020), and routinely referring to certain sources like government and academics to provide a credible voice to their stories (Tandoc and Oh 2017). Finally, **roles** would relate to how journalism operates and its responsibilities in society (Mellado 2015), whether it be providing a public service, scrutinizing the actions of the powers-that-be, or informing and educating the population (Deuze 2005).

Methodology

To determine if news on TikTok adheres to or diverges from the news values, norms, routines, and roles that have traditionally legitimized journalism, four research questions were crafted:

RQ1: Do TikTok news videos feature traditional news values?

RQ2: Do TikTok news videos feature the journalistic norms of objectivity and transparency?

RQ3: Do TikTok news videos abide by the journalistic routines of using specific topics, frames and sources?

RQ4: Do TikTok news videos play certain professional roles?

Content analysis was chosen as the research method, deemed particularly useful in close examinations of a news organization's output; this was also adopted in Wu's (2024) study on immersive journalism and Tandoc and Oh's (2017) study on data journalism, both of which had examined the extent to which news content aligned with professional journalistic values.

To obtain the TikTok news videos for analysis, Wu's (2024) method of selecting established news organizations was adopted, by referring to the list of the top 50 English-language news websites in the world, ranked by visitor count in March 2021, according to British media organisation Press Gazette, an online source that covers developments in the evolution of news and media industries. From this list of 50 news organizations, compiled by Majid (2021) for Press Gazette, a check was made on TikTok on the follower counts of each news organization; the 10 news organizations with the highest follower counts were then selected, namely the Daily Mail, Sky News, ABC News, NBC News, CBS News, CNN, BBC News, USA Today, The Sun, and People.com (see Table 1).

A decision was made to analyze the latest 20 TikTok news videos from each news organization, creating a sample of 200 news videos. This mimicked the study of Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and López-García (2022) that examined 190 TikTok videos to discover how journalism adapts to the logic of TikTok. Choosing the latest videos would present the latest iterations of TikTok news that is produced by the leading news organizations, hence offering the most up-to-date view of news production on that platform. These videos were all manually downloaded and analyzed in November 2023, with the latest video posted on 17 November 2023 and working

Table 1. News organizations selected.

News organization	TikTok followers	Country	Type (Print=P, Broadcast=B, Digital-Only=D)
Daily Mail	7.3 million	UK	P, B
Sky News	5.3 million	UK	P, B
ABC News	5.1 million	US	B
NBC News	4.7 million	US	B
CBS News	3.6 million	US	B
CNN News	3.1 million	US	B
BBC News	2.5 million	UK	B
USA Today	1.9 million	US	P, B
The Sun	1.9 million	UK	P
People.com	1.9 million	US	P

backwards. The video that dated the furthest back in the sample was 9 November 2023, produced by NBC News; this date range suggests how intensely each news organization is producing TikTok news videos on a daily basis.

Each news video was first watched in its entirety and then watched a second time for coding purposes, a technique used by de Bruin et al. (2020) in their analysis of immersive stories. A majority of the TikTok videos in this study were short clips that were less than 2 minutes long; the shortest clip lasted just 20 seconds, while the longest one lasted about 5 minutes.

To conduct the coding, a coding manual was developed by the research team (see [Supplemental Material](#)) and the coding process was completed by two coders. 10% of the TikTok videos collected were sampled for intercoder-reliability, resulting in a 70% to 100% agreement across all the variables.

For RQ1 on news values, a total of 17 variables were used, identified in research by Shoemaker and Reese (1996), Bednarek and Capel (2017), and Harcup and O'Neill (2017), including prominence, magnitude, relevance, human interest, the unusual, timeliness, conflict, shareability, and the news organization's agenda.

For RQ2 on journalistic norms, the objectivity norm was operationalized into three variables based on research by Tandoc and Oh (2017), Bradshaw, Kenski, and Henderson (2019), and Wu (2024), namely 1) presence or absence of the author's own judgement or interpretation, 2) presence or absence of a discussion of opposing sides, and 3) presence or absence of justification or evidence for all sides. When looking at the norm of transparency, this study referenced the work of Rupar (2006), Karlsson (2010), and Tandoc and Oh (2017) to examine both source transparency (i.e., direct links, attached files, or mention of sources) and process transparency (i.e., the explanation/mention of analysis or how information was accessed).

For RQ3 on the use of certain topics, frames, and sources, 11 common topics were selected from the works of Karlsson (2016), Vermeer et al. (2020), and Wu (2024), including government, police, economy, education, and environment, among others. If new topics were discovered during the coding process, they would be added into the topic list. For commonly used frames in news, the work of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) was referenced, identifying five frames of namely responsibility, human interest, conflict, morality, and the economy. For sources, eight variables used by Tandoc and Oh (2017) and Wu (2024) were identified, including government, academics, business, and civil society.

For RQ4, on the roles that journalism is traditionally understood to play, a total of six roles were coded for, referencing the works of Mellado (2015) and Mellado et al. (2017), namely that of watchdog, loyal-facilitator, service, civic, infotainment, and interventionist.

Study Findings

News Values

To discover if news videos on TikTok aligned with news values typically found in traditional news, results for RQ1 revealed that such news values could be found in all the 200 videos in the sample, and this spanned all 17 news values.

The most common news value found in 100% of the stories was the “news organization’s agenda”, indicating that news organizations have not deviated from what they classify as “news” on their traditional media platforms. Examples of news organizations’ agendas include Sky News’ mission to “report on a broad range of stories in the UK and around the world, putting people at the centre of [their] storytelling” (Sky News 2023), ABC News’ aim to be a “daily source for breaking national and world news, exclusive interviews and 24/7 live streaming coverage that will help [audiences] stay up to date on the events shaping our world” (ABC News n.d.), and Daily Mail’s agenda to “deliver the breaking news, entertainment, and celebrity content that people need and want to know” (DailyMail.com n.d.).

The next most common news value was “relevance” at 94% or 188 stories, where the videos featured “stories about groups or nations perceived to be influential with, or culturally or historically familiar to, the audience” (Harcup and O’Neill 2017, 1482), such as demonstrations taking place in Washington DC pertaining to the Israel-Hamas War, and information about the possibility of a government shutdown in the US featured on the American news outlets.

This was followed by the news value of “shareability” at 92% or 184 stories, defined as stories that “are thought likely to generate sharing and comments via Facebook, Twitter and other forms of social media” (Harcup and O’Neill 2017, 1482), as they are perceived by the coders. Some examples included stories featuring politicians offering their views on other political figures – like US President Joe Biden being asked his opinion about Chinese President Xi Jinping, and then-Republican presidential candidate Chris Christie being asked about his competitors Nikki Haley and Ron DeSantis – as well as unusual occurrences such as teenagers robbing an Amazon Prime van in broad daylight, and a Scottish politician bringing his parliamentary iPad on vacation and incurring thousands of dollars in roaming charges.

The three least common news values were “drama” at 13%, specifically defined as stories that featured “unfolding drama such as escapes, accidents, searches, sieges, rescues, battles or court cases” (Harcup and O’Neill 2017, 1482) and that had a negative connotation (Westerståhl and Johansson 1994); “good news” at 17%, featuring stories with “particularly positive overtones such as recoveries, breakthroughs, cures, wins and celebrations” (Harcup and O’Neill 2017, 1482); and “conflict” at 26%, i.e., stories that were negative (Bednarek and Caple 2017) and featured “controversies, arguments, splits, strikes, fights, insurrections and warfare” (Harcup and O’Neill 2017, 1482).

Journalistic Norms

Objectivity

RQ2 investigated if TikTok news videos adhered to the journalistic norms of objectivity and transparency. Results showed that a majority of the stories were objective, with 85% or 170 stories displaying at least one of the three dimensions of objectivity, namely the absence of the author’s own judgment or interpretation, the presence of opposing sides, and the presence of justification or evidence for all sides.

Looking at the individual dimensions of objectivity also offered some interesting insights. While 25% of the stories showed the author injecting their own judgment

or interpretation into the video – for instance, when a CNN reporter described her own interaction with Xi Jinping or when a BBC reporter expressed his disbelief at the football club that made the most money the year before – the majority (i.e., 75%) of the news videos produced by news organizations did not inject subjective opinions into their coverage, even on TikTok. That said, attempts at presenting multiple sides were lower. Only 31.5% of the videos showed opposing sides, and 26% showed justification or evidence for all sides, potentially attributable to the short length of TikTok videos. Those videos that did not show opposing or multiple sides spanned a range of different topics, including “government, politics, courts, laws”; “energy, environment, weather, and climate change”; “health, science, technology”; “accidents and natural disasters”; “human rights, demonstrations, protests, social problems”; and “lifestyle and culture.”

Transparency

As for the journalistic norm of transparency, all the TikTok news videos were transparent, displaying either source or process transparency, or both. In total, all 100% of the stories exhibited source transparency, either in the form of individual mentions of sources (e.g. “The Prime Minister said...”) or grouped mentions of sources (e.g. “James via Storyful”), while 85.5% or 171 stories exhibited process transparency (i.e., explanation of how the information was obtained and/or analyzed). Specifically, all 171 stories that displayed process transparency mentioned how the information was obtained, and 39 mentioned how the information was analyzed. Such information usually took the form of text embedded in the videos, captions at the bottom of the videos, and/or journalists offering explanations of sources and processes in their videos or through voiceovers.

Journalistic Routines

Topics

For RQ3, when examining if TikTok news videos aligned with journalistic routines of using specific topics, frames and sources, results showed that all 100% of the stories displayed at least one of the traditional journalism topics. The most common topic for TikTok news stories was “government, politics, courts, laws” at 26% or 52 stories. These stories involved topics relating to political debates, and summits or meetings between political leaders, such as political debates on the Rwanda asylum plan in the UK and the potential government shutdown in the US. This was followed by “lifestyle and culture” at 25% or 51 stories, which tended to include celebrity news such as Hollywood actress Gwyneth Paltrow talking about her family, and news about historical buildings or significant landmarks such as the construction of the Sagrada Familia cathedral in Spain. The third most common topic was “war and conflict” at 11.5% or 23 stories, tied largely to the much-discussed Israel-Hamas conflict.

Notably, the topic category of “war and conflict” was newly created in this study, given the large number of videos that displayed this; it was defined in the codebook as “stories showing scenes of warfare or large-scale conflict.” Another new category “community/ civilian interaction” was created as well, with 4.5% or 9 stories that

featured this, defined in the codebook as “good deeds done by citizens and good Samaritan news.”

The least common topics in the corpus were “education” with no stories featuring it at all, “health, science, technology” and “religion” at 0.5% or 1 story each, and “transportation, housing, infrastructure and public works” at 1% or 2 stories.

Frames

In terms of frames, a high 99% of the TikTok news videos featured news frames associated with traditional journalism; only two stories did not – they were a video showing a red-carpet scene of celebrity Nicole Richie and her husband posing for photos, and another showing a black panther spotted in a field in Scotland, with both videos offering no further details.

Definitions of the five frames used in this study were drawn from Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). The most common news frame present in the corpus was the “human interest” frame, where a high 92.5% or 185 stories demonstrated the human impact of issues and/or featured the presence of a human example or “human face” on an issue, such as celebrity Patrick Dempsey on cold plunging, and Americans on the tipping culture in the US.

This was followed by the “responsibility” frame, present in 78% or 156 stories where an individual, group, or government was depicted as being responsible for an issue or problem and/or could solve or alleviate it. These included stories about the possibility of the Chinese government sending new pandas to American zoos to improve Chinese-US relations, the UK’s plans to fly asylum seekers to Rwanda as part of its Rwanda asylum plan, and discussions on policies between American senators in Congress.

The third most common news frame was the “conflict” frame, found in 42.5% or 85 stories, where stories demonstrated disagreement or reproachment between sides and/or reflected winners and losers, featuring stories like Republican presidential candidates arguing during the televised debates, and people in Gaza suffering black-outs due to Israel cutting power and fuel supplies to the area.

The last two news frames with the least stories were the “morality” frame, featuring videos that contained a moral message on how to behave, found in 17.5% or 35 stories, such as a story on the police in the UK making an error in its investigations that resulted in the death of a stalking victim; and finally, the “economic” frame, that discussed economic losses or gains, found in 10% or 20 stories.

Sources

A very low 1% or 2 of the TikTok news videos did not mention a source. The most commonly cited source was “government”, found in 51% or 102 stories, followed by “ordinary people” in 36% or 72 stories, and “culture and arts” in 22% or 44 stories. In terms of the least cited sources, “civil society” was least cited in just 4% of the stories, followed by academics in 6.5%, and “business” in 13.5% of the stories.

Professional Roles

In response to RQ4, it was found that all the 200 TikTok news videos analyzed displayed at least one of the six professional roles found in traditional journalism. Definitions of these roles were obtained from Mellado (2015) and Mellado et al. (2017).

The most common professional role exhibited was the “infotainment” role, found in 93.5% or 187 stories, with news that centred on particular individuals and their characteristics and/or those that aimed to thrill or entertain the audience, such as the establishment of a new “Beyoncé Reporter” at USA Today and US President Joe Biden cracking a joke when someone fell in the venue where he was giving his speech.

This was followed by the “interventionist” role, found in 87.5% or 175 stories, that saw the journalist offering explanations on the causes and meanings of stories and/or taking sides to advocate for certain groups or causes, such as a story on Sky News where the journalist offered his opinion on the events in Gaza, and another story on ABC News where the journalist discussed her own experience asking questions to US President Biden and Chinese President Xi during the summit between the two heads of state.

The third most exhibited role was the “civic” role, found in 48% or 96 stories, where the rights, perspectives, and activities of citizens were discussed, such as a story on an animal rescue effort in Grindavik, Ireland, after an earthquake, and a building evacuation in Bristol in the UK due to structural concerns. The “watchdog” role followed this closely as the fourth most common role, holding the government and political and economic elites accountable; it was featured in 42% or 84 stories, such as one that discussed the meeting between US President Biden and Chinese President Xi on improving military communication, and laws pertaining to transgender youths and their families in the US.

The least exhibited role was the “service” role found within 8.5% or 17 stories, which offered everyday advice to audiences, such as a story on people offering their opinions on tipping when making transactions. This was followed by the second least common “loyal-facilitator” role, found in 9.5% or 19 stories, that showed support for those in power or highlighted a country’s advancement, including stories like the “March for Israel” in the US, and progress made between US President Biden and Chinese President Xi on US-China issues.

Discussion and Conclusion

Results of this study are summarized in [Table 2](#). Detailed below are findings that are particularly noteworthy or surprising.

First, when it came to **news values**, it was heartening to note that all the 200 TikTok news videos continued to align with the news value of the “news organization’s agenda” and kept to their organization’s mission statements – news outlets that focused on presenting important and breaking news to their audiences on their traditional platforms continued to do the same on TikTok, while those that aimed to provide news, entertainment and celebrity content continued to do so on their TikTok accounts. At the same time, the audience continued to be top priority for news organizations, with “relevance” of the news to the news organization’s target audience as a second most common news value at 94%.

The third most common news value of “shareability” at 92% presented a notable trend; this aligned with Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and López-Garcías’ (2022, 1728) work that saw shareability as a “rising news value” as the media landscape becomes

Table 2. Characteristics of news produced by news organizations on TikTok.

News values, norms, routines, roles	Findings
News values	Most common: 1. news organization's agenda (100%) 2. relevance (94%) 3. shareability (92%)
Objectivity	85% of the news videos were objective
Transparency	100% of the stories had source transparency, 85% had process transparency
Topics	Most common: 1. government, politics, courts, and laws (26%) 2. lifestyle and culture (25%) 3. war and conflict (11.5%) *Notable topics: war and conflict; community/ civilian interaction
Frames	Most common: 1. human interest (92.5%) 2. responsibility (78%) 3. conflict (42.5%)
Sources	Most common: 1. government (51%) 2. ordinary people (36%) 3. culture and arts (22%)
Professional roles	Most common: 1. infotainment (93.5%) 2. interventionist (87.5%) 3. civic (48%)

more competitive; it has also been described by scholars like Harcup and O'Neill (2017) and Hurcombe, Burgess, and Harrington (2021) as a key distinction of social media news, where news may be made popular by the sharing activities of social media users (Nowak-Teter and Łódzki 2024).

Interestingly, despite presenting news videos that were largely shareable, the news values of "drama" and "conflict" did not feature highly in the corpus – indicating that what gets viewed as shareable on social media need not be tied to the news being negative in nature. Given that news organizations are known to view bad news as particularly newsworthy (Harcup and O'Neill 2017), this signals a notable turn towards news that has more mass appeal and that need not have a negative undertone.

Next, when it comes to **journalistic norms**, TikTok videos produced by news organizations demonstrated, in a notable finding, that a majority did abide by the objectivity norm. This shows that TikTok videos produced by news organizations have not necessarily evolved to become more subjective or personality-based, as social media is often viewed (Zajc 2015). In fact, only 25% of the stories analyzed showed the author injecting their own judgments or interpretations into stories. That said, a majority of the TikTok videos did not show opposing sides or provide evidence for all sides – this indicates that the short video format of TikTok might be hindering news organizations from providing more than a singular view of a story. This could be worrying in the long run and contribute to the creation of "echo chambers" (Sunstein 2001) that might be circulating the same skewed content and perspectives, causing the citizenry to be less informed rather than more so.

As for the alignment of TikTok news videos with the transparency norm, it was heartening to observe that all the videos in the corpus continued to abide by that. All the videos displayed source transparency, and 85.5% displayed process transparency, that is, pointing to who their sources were and how their information was obtained or analyzed. This shows that the norm of transparency continues to be

upheld by news organizations on TikTok, despite the short video format that presents length restrictions; transparency is not a norm that has been sacrificed due to this.

Next, when it comes to **journalistic routines**, it can be observed that all the TikTok news videos in the corpus continued to feature at least one of the traditional journalism topics. Of this, “government, politics, courts, and laws” was the most common topic at 26%, followed by “lifestyle and culture” at 25%. This shows, encouragingly, that news organizations have not shifted significantly to focus on softer stories that are more sensationalist and entertaining in nature, but rather, continue to deliver to audiences hard news stories that are important for them to know about, in order to become active and well-informed citizens.

Notably, two new topics emerged in this corpus. One of them was “war and conflict”, given the Israel-Hamas war going on at that time that did not fit into the category of “government, politics, courts, and laws” nor “human rights, demonstrations, protests, social problems.” This highlights the focus of TikTok news on salient issues of the day, echoing the view of Nowak-Teter and Łódzki (2024) on the real-time aspect of news and opinions on the Internet. The other new topic was “community/ civilian interaction”, where focus was placed on good deeds of citizens. This presents a move towards more “good news” types of journalism and away from traditional tendencies of the press to focus on bad news to draw audiences. This is an encouraging and notable discovery.

With regards to frames, the “human interest” frame was the most commonly featured followed by the “responsibility” frame and the “conflict” frame. The high 92.5% of stories featuring the “human interest” frame signals the desire of news organizations to appeal more to audience interests and curiosity; this is especially at a time when news organizations are focusing more on audience analytics (Tandoc 2014) and paying more attention to what audiences are clicking on and engaging more with, in a bid to increase their viewership numbers and advertising revenues (Wu, 2024b).

As for sources, the most commonly cited source was “government” featured in 51% of stories, followed by “ordinary people” in 36% of stories – this signals that even on TikTok, a platform deemed as more participatory (Ng 2023), the government source continues to be a prominent one, aligning with other studies that pinpoint government as a leading information source for journalists (Benson and Wood 2015; O’Neill and O’Connor 2008).

Finally, in terms of **professional roles**, “infotainment” was the most common role at 93.5%, with stories tending to feature persons and their characteristics, sensational aspects, and appeals to emotions. This high statistic goes to show that even when story topics were on hard news events pertaining to government, war, accidents and protests, stories would tend to be centred on persons and appeal to emotions, potentially as a means to touch audiences and increase shareability. “Infotainment” here does not necessarily refer to light-hearted entertaining news.

The second most common role is “interventionist” at 87.5% – most evident from the offering of explanations by journalists to explain the causes and meaning of stories. Notably, the evidence of them taking sides remains low, at less than 10%. This aligns with the “objectivity” statistic revealed earlier, showing that journalists rarely inject their own opinions into stories, even on TikTok. This shows an interesting deviation from the work of Mellado and Hermida (2021), who discussed the growth

of journalists as “promoter, celebrity, and joker” on social media in theoretical terms – in the real world, professional journalists working in established news organizations seem to maintain their neutrality in most instances, according to this study.

So is There a Cause for Concern?

In light of these findings, is there a cause for concern for the quality of news shown by news organizations on TikTok?

Results of this study indicate that “news” as it is traditionally conceived has not been diluted on TikTok to the extent that many might fear, given its short video format and seeming focus on general entertainment. It seems news organizations have leveraged on the dynamic and creative nature of the platform without sacrificing long-established values of journalism in concerning ways.

News organizations have stayed true to their mission statements and are presenting news that is relevant to their audiences. This has been done without skewing their content to focus on the sensationalist and frivolous – they are shown to continue to focus on the salient issues of the day that audiences need to know about to be properly informed, and discuss hard news topics pertaining to politics and war. That said, it is clear that there is a goal to increase the shareability of stories, where narratives take on a “human interest” element to focus on individuals, human impacts, and appeal to emotions. This is evident in stories that are both soft and “infotaining”, as well as hard news stories that focus on harder hitting topics. The need to create in this study a new topic on “community/ civilian interaction” that includes stories on good deeds of citizens similarly aligns with this finding. At this moment, this focus on human interest to increase shareability is not particularly concerning, since journalism continues to play its public service role of informing the people on issues of public relevance.

It is notable as well that this focus on human impact and human examples has not resulted in TikTok news stories becoming more personality-based and subjective in ways that might be worrying. News organizations on TikTok have not unanchored themselves from journalism’s established norms of objectivity and transparency – results of this study show that a majority of coverage does not show the journalist injecting his or her own judgments or interpretations into stories, even while they continue to offer explanations on causes and context, and significant emphasis is placed on being transparent on sources and processes to lend weight to the coverage; this result is a reassuring one.

That said, there are two main points of concern, or what news organizations could work more on, that have emerged from this study. First is the lack of presentation of multiple sides to stories, resulting in narratives that might be skewed – this is a likely consequence of the short length of videos on TikTok. This might have potential negative effects on audiences, where they might adopt biased perspectives from the echo chambers that result. As such, wherever reasonable, news organizations should do more to present different sides to stories, or at least indicate that they exist, within the short time frame. That said, there might be instances, such as in the case of human rights violations or scientific consensus on climate change, where giving weight to all sides might skew or potentially misinform audiences (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004).

This recommendation is therefore topic-centric and decisions will be reliant on the news organization's editorial expertise.

Another point that news organizations could work on would be diversifying sources of stories to include more voices on the ground. At this point, "government" remains the most dominant type of news source, even while stories are focusing more on human impacts and human examples. More could be done to leverage on the participatory nature of TikTok to include more voices from community; this could also add to the mass appeal or shareability of their news videos. This paper stresses that news organizations can become stronger in their delivery of quality news, even as they adapt to the social media logics of TikTok.

Some limitations of this study should be noted here. This study's findings are tied to the established legacy news organizations selected for analysis; examinations of different news channels, such as those specializing in tabloid news, might result in findings that are more varied. The time frame within which the news videos were collected may also influence the types of stories that get produced. This study, however, offers a good view of how leading news organizations are using the TikTok platform. Future research on this topic can interrogate how "balance" on TikTok looks like, and whether certain topics are presented with more singular viewpoints than others, and which voices tend to be amplified in those cases. It can also look beyond established news organizations to consider how other prominent providers of "news" on TikTok cover their stories in ways that might be non-conventional. Assessments on whether TikTok is a suitable or legitimate news source may also be investigated through surveys and focus groups with audiences.

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