

# The TikTok news challenge: The influence of the news organization on the editorial decision-making of TikTok editors

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## Abstract

This study examines how TikTok news is produced within a Belgian newsroom. While TikTok is the fastest-growing social media platform, research on its role in news production remains limited. Using ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews, we analyze the TikTok production process and explore how it is shaped by organizational structures, routines, and platform demands. Applying the Hierarchy of Influences model, our findings show that TikTok news editors benefit from significant autonomy but also face pressures from institutional expectations and platform logics. This tension requires them to balance innovation with adherence to journalistic standards while creating content aimed at TikTok's younger audience. We identify five key challenges that emerged during our observations. With this research, we aim to shed light on broader trends transforming journalism in the social media age.

## Keywords

Hierarchy of influence, observational study, social media journalism, social media editors, TikTok

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## Introduction

As social media have become the primary source of news for many people, it is not surprising that news organizations increasingly focus on producing and distributing content on these platforms. They consider both general social media logic and the specific dynamics of individual platforms, characterized by strong visuals, popularity, engagement, and algorithmic curation (Anter, 2025; Peterson-Salahuddin and Diakopoulos, 2020; van Dijck and Poell, 2013). The term platformization refers to how this logic influences journalistic practices in content and form (Hase et al., 2023). News outlets increasingly let platform logics guide editorial decisions, resulting in new forms of journalism. This is not entirely new: in the early 2000s, blogging and tweeting journalists already adapted routines to align with platforms (Lasorsa et al., 2012; Singer, 2005). But with growing platform popularity and their influence on everyday life, informal interactions, and institutional structures (van Dijck and Poell, 2013), platformization now penetrates journalism more deeply than ever. To support the shift toward so-called social media journalism (Hendrickx and Opgenhaffen, 2024b), newsrooms have restructured and reorganized workflows to better achieve editorial and commercial goals (García-Avilés et al., 2014). For example, social media editors have been appointed to optimize news production and distribution across platforms (Opgenhaffen and Hendrickx, 2024). These editors create content but are also expected to reach new audiences, build brand awareness, and foster engagement (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Priola, 2023). However, the social media news landscape is in constant flux and increasingly fragmented. Platform popularity shifts as new platforms emerge and older ones lose relevance. Legacy platforms such as Facebook and X are reducing their focus on news to avoid reliance on external links and so-called link taxes (Dwyer et al., 2023). Meanwhile, video-centric platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are rapidly gaining traction as news channels (Newman et al., 2024). These platforms are particularly successful in reaching younger audiences (Anter and Kümpel, 2023; Hendrickx, 2024; Swart et al., 2022), but we still know relatively little about how journalism is produced for them, or what happens behind the scenes.

This study complements recent research on journalism on TikTok by moving the focus away from the platform's content toward the processes behind it. Through what is, to the best of our knowledge, the first observational study in a TikTok newsroom, and using the hierarchy of influences model, this research identifies behind-the-scenes challenges in TikTok news production. It describes how the production process unfolds across different levels within a news organization and explores the various influences at play. By doing so, the study not only offers a deeper understanding of social media journalism practices specific to TikTok but also provides suggestions for the broader field of social media journalism research, and for the emerging subfield of TikTok journalism.

## Theoretical framework

### *Influence of social media on journalism*

Social media have become a routine part of journalism, shaping news construction, branding, and news dissemination (Humayun and Ferrucci, 2022), while also serving as a

space for audience interaction. This growing integration has raised concerns about how such platforms might influence or even change fundamental principles of journalism. What would later be called platformization (e.g., [Dvir-Gvirsman and Tsurriel, 2022](#); [Hase et al., 2023](#))—the idea that the general logic of social media and specific platform characteristics shape journalistic routines and decisions—was already on the research agenda from the early days of social media adoption by news organizations and individual journalists. Over the past 20 years, many studies have examined tensions between social media use and journalistic norms and professional control across platforms. Much research has focused on how social media routines might put pressure on principles such as objectivity, quality, impartiality, gatekeeping, and discretion. Several studies show that journalists and news organizations often relaxed their traditional norms and practices to align more closely with platform logics (e.g., [Hermida and Mellado, 2020](#); [Lasorsa et al., 2012](#); [Singer, 2005](#); [Tandoc and Vos, 2016](#)). Also the literature review of [Degen et al. \(2024\)](#) underscores that social media have prompted a renegotiation of journalistic values and norms, they have not caused a fundamental paradigm shift. Rather, journalists and organizations adapt their practices in context-sensitive ways.

Another challenge is the influence of social media on the traditional boundary between journalism and marketing. For instance, research has examined how individual journalists began branding themselves via social media—particularly on Facebook and Twitter—to build a professional identity ([Hedman, 2020](#)). This personal branding is often strategically important for freelancers seeking assignments or generating additional traffic for the outlet they work for ([Brems et al., 2017](#)). This development has led to a substantial body of research into social media guidelines issued by news organizations to mitigate risks of misuse or reputational harm (e.g., [Molyneux and Nelson, 2024](#); [Opgenhaffen and d’Haenens, 2015](#)). In addition, academic attention has been devoted to new journalistic roles that emerged with social media’s rise, such as audience engagement editors ([Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc, 2018](#)) and social media editors ([Opgenhaffen and Hendrickx, 2024](#)). This research often explores how these professionals operate at the intersection of journalism and marketing ([Lischka, 2021](#); [Tsurriel et al., 2021](#)).

A third major line of research examines how social media influence news selection and editing, compared to traditional media like newspapers or news sites. Some studies show that social media follow different news values and highlight more “softer” topics (e.g., [Harcup and O’Neill, 2017](#); [Lamot, 2022](#)), while others argue that topic selection and presentation do not significantly differ from traditional media ([Anter, 2024](#); [Klein et al., 2023](#)). Studies on editing examine how news form changes when transferred between platforms, including intermedial changes ([Verstappen and Opgenhaffen, 2024](#)), and how social media headlines are stripped of nuance ([Verstappen et al., 2022](#)) or made more engaging ([Lamot et al., 2022](#)). A key finding across these studies is that platformization does influence journalistic routines and decision-making, but not always uniformly. This variation is likely due to the heterogeneity of the research itself. Studies focus on different types of news—from general to specific topics—making direct comparisons difficult. Moreover, given how platforms like Facebook and Twitter (now X) have evolved in just a few years, the shifting context complicates comparisons and explains the lack of consensus. As previously noted, the specific affordances of each social media platform must

also be considered. While Facebook, YouTube, and X all fall under the social media umbrella, they are fundamentally different in practice. They may share some common affordances, but each also has unique, platform-specific ones (Anter, 2025). Therefore, studying social media journalism requires treating platforms not as a single block but based on their individual characteristics, constraints, and contingencies (Hendrickx and Opgenhaffen, 2024b).

### *TikTok and journalism*

Investigating the relationship between journalism and TikTok is highly relevant for several reasons. First, TikTok is the latest “new kid on the block” in social media, with rapidly growing popularity—not only among teenagers and young adults but increasingly also older demographics, see e.g., ‘granfluencers’ (Ng and Indran, 2023). As such, it is now a mainstream platform. At the same time, TikTok stands apart from others. Unlike Facebook and Instagram, it is not owned by Meta but by the Chinese tech company ByteDance. On TikTok, journalistic content is often native—created specifically for the platform—instead of being adapted from material published on websites or TV (Hase et al., 2023a; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2020). News organizations also appear to be adopting more of TikTok’s technological affordances than they did with Instagram (Hendrickx and Vázquez-Herrero, 2024). Moreover, TikTok differs from Facebook and Instagram in its highly algorithmic approach to content delivery. The For You page, which serves as the default feed for most users, curates content algorithmically rather than from one’s follow list (Hagar and Diakopoulos, 2025; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2024). The platform’s strong algorithmic curation does not appear to work in favor of news content (Hagar and Diakopoulos, 2025), and users themselves associate TikTok less with news than, for example, Instagram (Hendrickx, 2024). In addition to this, the platform offers opportunities not only for traditional journalistic actors but also for others involved in disseminating news and information. It is not only citizen journalists (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2024), but also influencers and other personalities who have become important sources of information for many users (Newman et al., 2023: 13). As a result, for news organizations to be noticed, having followers is not enough—they must create content that stands out on a crowded timeline. In response, they are experimenting with new ways to bring journalism closer to the audience (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2020). Early research into what drives news engagement on TikTok suggests there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach, emphasizing that videos must be engaging so young people do not find them boring (Cheng and Li, 2024: 216; Newman, 2022). With no direct link to the news website, the app is used mainly to familiarize the audience with the journalistic brand. This so-called ‘brand-building news’ (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019, 2020) thrives in a context with low hypertextuality, limited interconnectivity, and a strong visual focus (Hase et al., 2023). TikTok at heart is an entertainment app, so there must be an element of fun (Cheng and Li, 2024). Al-Rawi (2024) introduced the concept of ‘edutainment’ as a unique TikTok feature. One effective approach is storytelling that combines entertainment and information, which resonates with younger audiences (García-Ortega and García-Avilés, 2023). Recent research on German TikTok editors highlights platform-specific

storytelling techniques such as crisp openers, simplified narrating styles, and appealing audiovisuals (Degen et al., 2024). News media also use TikTok's editing features—filters, stickers, and GIFs (Negreira-Rey et al., 2022). Research shows that direct, eye-to-eye presentation increases audience engagement (Klug and Autenrieth, 2022), and close-ups strongly predict a video's virality (Ling et al., 2022). Young people appreciate it when news organizations adapt their style on TikTok using more visual and linguistic storytelling (Hendrickx, 2024). A clear example is how The Washington Post packages news with comedy sketches, jokes, and trending TikTok sounds and effects (Zulli et al., 2024). This approach is uncommon compared to traditional practices (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2020). A recent content analysis found that hard news is less common on TikTok than on Instagram Reels, in both quality and tabloid media (Wirz and Zai, 2025). Entertaining elements (e.g., music or stickers) appear in both hard and soft news. While this might suggest a softening of news content (Lamot, 2022), Wirz and Zai (2025) argue it may also indicate greater professionalization of journalists using the platform. This trend is more pronounced on TikTok than Instagram, where presentation remains more restrained (Hendrickx and Vázquez-Herrero, 2024).

Producing news on TikTok requires embracing platform-specific aesthetics and engagement logics, leading news organizations to hire TikTok editors and journalists specifically for the platform. These journalists form a distinct subgroup within social media editors. Existing research shows social media editors generally identify as journalists, but they often work at the intersection of journalism and marketing, which can cause tensions (Lischka, 2021; Neilson et al., 2023; Opgenhaffen and Hendrickx, 2024; Tsuruel et al., 2021). Earlier studies on social media editors on other platforms show they closely consider both audience preferences and algorithmic demands when selecting topics and shaping news content (e.g., Lamot et al., 2022; Opgenhaffen, 2021; Verstappen and Opgenhaffen, 2024; Welbers and Opgenhaffen, 2019). Yet we still know little about how these dynamics play out behind the scenes in a TikTok newsroom, and what challenges arise in balancing journalistic values with the platform's entertainment-driven logic. On TikTok, alternative news providers are highly present, and its style is arguably the furthest removed from traditional formats. Moreover, since most content consists of native posts rather than links or adapted stories, the volume of daily posts is much lower than on other social platforms. As a result, newsrooms must make strategic decisions about which limited posts to publish—especially when these few posts must support branding and appeal to hard-to-reach audiences such as young people.

### *The hierarchy of influences*

In this study, we apply a Hierarchy of Influences (HOI) model to gain a deeper understanding of how TikTok content is produced in the newsroom, how different levels of influence interact, and what kinds of tensions or challenges this creates. Sociologists Shoemaker and Reese (1996) developed the HOI model to analyze the complex processes behind news production. Updated in 2014 to reflect journalistic practices, it identifies five levels of influence structured from macro to micro: the social system level, social institution level, media organization level, routine practices level, and individual level

(Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). The model emphasizes the process through which journalists practice journalism (Ferrucci and Kuhn, 2022). At the individual level—the most micro level—it examines personal characteristics of news workers, including the news values they uphold, their professional roles, and other demographic factors (e.g., Xu and Jin, 2017). The next level involves routines: structured, repetitive practices in production that do not always stem from conscious choices but serve organizational needs. These include tasks like news selection, workflow management, and fact-checking (e.g., Kwanda and Lin, 2020). The media organization level looks at how organizational factors shape content, including structure, policies, and internal architecture (e.g., Ekayanti and Xiaoming, 2018). The social institution level (the meso level) focuses on external forces such as media sources (e.g., official sources, inter-media sources, media watchdogs), advertisers, and broader media policies that may shape content (e.g., Chen et al., 2020). Finally, the macro level—the social system—examines how broader cultural and societal dynamics affect media production (Reese and Shoemaker, 2016; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Both meso and macro levels provide a lens on the larger system in which journalism operates, offering a global perspective (Reese, 2019). The authors originally suggested these categories were hierarchical, with the macro level influencing all lower levels, but the individual level not affecting higher ones (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). In later work, they argued that all levels hold equal power (Reese, 2001; Reese and Shoemaker, 2016).

Several studies using the Hierarchy of Influences model explicitly or implicitly discuss how journalism now exists within a digital and social media context, and how this new context may or may not shape the profession (see for example Degen and Olgemöller, 2021; Ferrucci, 2018). However, to our knowledge, the model has not yet been applied to TikTok journalism. We use this hierarchy of influences because, even as research on social media innovation has grown, there remains a need to study professional culture, decision-making processes, and the constraints they face (García-Avilés, 2021). Moreover, the model allows us to gain a more layered understanding of how a TikTok newsroom is experimenting with production on this relatively new platform, and what challenges emerge at different levels of influence. Our research question is therefore.

**RQ:** What factors influence the editorial decision-making of TikTok editors, and what challenges do they face in producing news content for the platform?

### *Analysing the Gazet van Antwerpen*

This research focuses on the newsroom of Gazet Van Antwerpen (GVA), a news brand providing coverage for the city and province of Antwerp, as well as major Belgian and international stories. GVA has a long tradition, first published in 1891. Today it is part of Mediahuis, one of the three main media conglomerates in Flanders, Belgium. The company owns four Flemish news brands, along with radio stations, TV brands, and specialized press in Belgium, and has branches in the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Ireland, and Germany. Mediahuis's Belgian headquarters in Antwerp also house GVA, the national newspaper *Het Nieuwsblad*, and the radio station *Nostalgie*, with which they often

collaborate. In 2023, GVA achieved the highest growth among all Flemish news titles. The website saw a 7% rise in pageviews, while the app grew by 29%. Additionally, GVA recorded the highest percentage growth on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok (Hendrickx and Opgenhaffen, 2024a). Notably, they only joined TikTok in September 2022, and it was still in an experimental phase. This rapid growth, along with GVA's position within Mediahuis, led us to choose it as our case study.

The social media team at GVA has two main parts: the TikTok team and the Facebook team. The TikTok team launched in September 2022 to manage and create TikTok content. Although GVA was the second-to-last Mediahuis brand to open a TikTok account, it quickly became the network's fastest-growing. At the start of our observations, the account had about 35,000 followers, reaching 50,000 by the end. Average views per TikTok were 82,308, with around 1848 likes per post. Each day, at least one of the two dedicated video reporters was responsible for scripting, filming, editing, and posting a minimum of two videos on TikTok. Most of these TikToks were later reposted on the website, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram. The Facebook team primarily adapts existing website content for Instagram and Facebook. This shift is managed by journalists who volunteered for the task, with one designated Facebook person each day and two online journalists 'on call' for morning and evening shifts. Because both teams post to Instagram, posting times are coordinated in advance. In addition to the social media team, there is also a marketing team. Within this five-person group, one person focuses specifically on social media marketing. Their main job is to promote campaigns across social channels. Managing social media is therefore a complex but essential part of the newsroom.

## Methodology

To gain a comprehensive understanding of how the editorial decision-making of TikTok editors is influenced by the organization, we conducted participatory observations in the newsroom. We use the HOI model to analyze different levels of influence on TikTok production. Observations are particularly effective in revealing typically hidden processes in news media and their roles within broader circuits of social and cultural power (Cottle, 2007). Between January 8th and March 6th, 2024, the first author was embedded in the newsroom of *Gazet van Antwerpen*. During this period, the researcher worked with the social media team, consisting of the TikTok team, the Facebook team, and the social media marketing team. The marketing team was included because they produce advertisements for social pages. Over about 200 h, time was split equally: 50% with the TikTok team (the study's main focus) and 50% with the Facebook team and marketing editors to provide broader context on social media production. The researcher was introduced in a role similar to an intern, aiming to learn as much as possible about editorial work while actively contributing to creating TikToks, monitoring Instagram and Facebook posts, and managing social media ads. The researcher also joined meetings and took part in discussions about practices and decision-making processes. We had full access to articles, metadata, audience metrics, and the newspaper's social media platforms. We were transparent about our focus and the purpose of our presence. The study received ethical approval from SMEC, KU Leuven, reference code G-2021-3618-R2. All

participants signed informed consent forms. Throughout the newsroom period, primarily handwritten and voice notes were used to capture observations, which were later transcribed for analysis. Using methodological triangulation, we conducted semi-structured interviews after the ethnographic work with social media news actors (Tisdell and Merriam, 2016). As Tisdell and Merriam explain: “what someone tells you in an interview can be checked against what you observe on site or what you read about in documents” (2016: 245). In the interviews, we mainly asked about the implementation, integration, and role of social media and TikTok in the newsroom. Transcripts were produced using the MyGoodTape service and manually reviewed for errors. NVivo software was used to code and organize the data, enabling efficient qualitative analysis. Open coding techniques helped identify patterns of influence affecting journalistic work across individual, routine, organizational, and social institution levels, consistent with the Hierarchy of Influences model.

## Results

Through the HOI model, we identified five key challenges aligned with its classifications. At the individual level, we observed the challenge of *diversity*. At the routines level, the challenge of *adaptation* emerged. At the organizational level, we found two challenges: *integration* and *profitability*, the latter linked to more market-oriented routines. From the social institution perspective, we observed the challenge of *platform dynamics*. We will discuss each challenge separately in the following sections. The social system level is not treated independently, as it is intertwined with other levels and influences practices at every stage (te Walvaart et al., 2018). However, we will reflect on this level in the conclusion and discussion sections.

### *The challenge of diversity*

At the individual level of the HOI model, our observations show that the TikTok journalists’ identity significantly shapes content production, especially since they appear on-screen and help define the newspaper’s image. Awareness of diversity emerged as a key part of TikTok production. During observations, we saw the TikTok team members actively prioritize bringing diverse stories to young audiences through their channels. This is a significant challenge, given the limited average number of posts published on TikTok each day. Being under twenty-five themselves, the editors stress that news should represent both young people and the city’s diversity. They feel traditional journalists often hesitate to do this effectively. Both TikTok journalists have foreign roots and emphasize this helps them recognize that much of their audience is from diverse backgrounds. They actively seek stories “only they can tell,” for example producing a video about Chinese New Year with the Chinese community. We observed conscious efforts to ensure diversity during vox pops, intentionally seeking a wide range of topics and interviewees even if it lengthens production. While editing, they review content to maintain these efforts, ensuring the final product reflects the diversity captured on film. An added benefit, they note,

is that TikTok videos often appear on the news website, increasing diversity on ‘traditional channels.’

“I try to incorporate diversity as much as possible in my videos because I find it incredibly important. I do that much more than my colleagues. I’m also a standout example in this regard, as our editor-in-chief often uses me and [the other TikTok editor] in meetings to illustrate diversity within the editorial team. However, not everyone on the editorial team shares the same intensity. I wouldn’t attribute this solely to close-mindedness—as I don’t believe you can be that conservative in the media, given all the news you encounter. I think it stems more from a place of ignorance.”

The editorial board is aware of the need for diversity in both news content and staffing. The TikTok editors note the editor-in-chief is trying to hire (young) people with diverse ethnic backgrounds to promote them as on-screen representatives. While they see this as positive, they also question if these are viewed as affirmative action hires. The importance of the identity of the TikTok journalists was highlighted in the following anecdote: while observing, the TikTok team was allowed to conduct interviews to hire someone new. They found a candidate they were excited about—a person of color with a successful personal TikTok account. However, the editorial team rejected the application because the candidate had a Ghent accent, which they felt didn’t fit Antwerp’s image. The background and perspective of the TikTok editors thus clearly influence content production, shaping the news brand’s image and supporting a more inclusive range of stories that reflect the city’s diversity.

### *The challenge of adaptation*

When the account launched, the appointed editor began experimenting with different styles and videos. We observed that no real *routines* were established by the organization, leaving TikTok editors largely self-directed in production and distribution. There is a sense in the newsroom that “the younger generation knows what they’re doing,” so they’re given free rein as long as no complaints arise. The TikTok journalists see this as a major advantage and a sign of trust but also feel a strong responsibility for the brand’s success on the platform. From day one, the goal was to grow the TikTok account. The fact that no specific TikTok routines have been fully internalized does not mean routines have no influence on their work. During observations, we noted that TikTok editors adopted general organizational routines and responded ad hoc to certain elements of social media logic. The team has professionalized their own routines based on brand preferences (e.g., focus on Antwerp), algorithm demands (e.g., strategic posting times), platform constraints (e.g., videos under 1 min), journalistic values (e.g., objectivity), personal style (e.g., humor), and audience reactions (e.g., comments). “It’s a mix of various inputs that you must navigate without losing yourself, it remains a continuous learning process.” Their daily workflow is mostly structured by the types of video stories they produce. Editing news videos from the sister brand’s broadcast is easier and faster than brainstorming, filming on location, or using the green screen. Videos for themed series like elections need

more planning and effort. Still, the overall goal remains: “carry over the stories of the website, while supplementing them in a more fun way.” After posting, editors review video reach and metrics. But the algorithm is so volatile that there is no fixed routine—rather, a flexible one that shifts daily, forcing editors to adapt constantly. One editor called the algorithm “the greatest mystery of their journalistic career.” During our observations, we saw that hard news content based on ATV broadcasts performed better than self-created videos. This led to frustration among editors torn between what they want to make and what performs well: “Sometimes you have to decide what’s best for the account: edit five hard news videos or spend a day making a funny video that maybe only gets 10,000 views.” At the same time, editors want to showcase their own ideas and creativity and create a brand identity that resonates with users:

“Numbers, views, everything needs to be on point. But I’m still like, yeah, it still needs to have a personality. We can just make the news. However, how does it distinguish us from other news brands?”

### *The challenge of integration*

At the *organizational level*, we observed the challenge of integration. The TikTok team noted it took time for journalists to see the added value of TikTok and develop a workflow with other departments. Many journalists over 35 don’t have TikTok accounts and don’t engage with its content. Only after the account’s success became clear, and they saw benefits for their own stories, did attitudes shift. “If I post a video based on their content and it generates 200,000 views within 24 h, I am aware of that impact. If their article only gets 10,000 views on the website, then my video has performed significantly better and reached many more people.” Now, most of the editorial staff support the video initiatives, making guest appearances and asking TikTok journalists to join them on stories that work well on video. Flagging “TikTok-proof” stories has become a new routine. This shift is also helped by the fact that, despite hybrid working, TikTok journalists are in the office every day, making them easy to consult. However, some older journalists (50+) remain resistant. They refuse to accompany TikTok journalists on assignments or take photos and videos when asked. In one case, incorrect information was even shared with the TikTok team, forcing them to discard a day’s work.

“In that regard, the older generation is in conflict with the younger generation. They fully understand what we do, but they simply don’t want to engage. I’m not going to beg my colleagues.”

Another early point of tension was the spelling in video subtitles. During a meeting, frequent errors were noted, with jokes that video creators couldn’t write properly, sidelining them from “real” journalists. As a result, the organization introduced a new routine: subtitles must be reviewed by a line editor before posting. The TikTok editors don’t see this as negative, instead viewing it as protection from complaints. They even see advantages: “It helps me establish my role. I’ve made it clear that I’m a TikTok creator.”

Beyond this, the TikTok team is well integrated in the editorial room and the broader organization. One daily practice involves editing TikToks from local TV channel ATV broadcasts, generating significant “easy” views. The TV channel appreciates this arrangement, as it lacks staff to do it but can still reach new audiences. For “hard” news stories needing a professional voice, they use the radio station on the same floor. Radio presenters record scripts for voice-overs. The green screen studio is also shared with the TikTok team from the national news brand downstairs, showing how the various media brands collaborate within the organization.

### *The challenge of profitability*

While new *organizational* routines and processes emerged through the integration of TikTok, our observations also revealed a need for a market-oriented balance. A topic that frequently emerged in the newsroom was the challenge of generating profit from videos on TikTok and Instagram. While Facebook continues to direct significant traffic to the website, thereby providing social media editors with a measurable target, assessing the success of video content on other platforms remains more complex and less quantifiable. The only platform that generates revenue through video content is YouTube Shorts, allowing for reinvestment via Google Ads. However, this revenue is minimal compared to the income generated by subscriptions and advertising streams. The editorial team is aware that the TikTok team doesn’t generate significant revenue. Since the social media platforms TikTok and Instagram don’t link back to the website or app, no advertising income can be generated. For this reason, the TikTok team doesn’t see themselves as strictly necessary.

“That’s something I always keep in the back of my mind. Push comes to shove if the newspaper has to lay off half of its people. I’d be part of that, right? I don’t generate any income. So I’m painfully aware of it, but I’m still doing my best as long as they want me. But nowadays, you can’t live without social media. It’s almost the most important thing.”

Nevertheless, the editorial board appears to embrace the digital landscape as a key component of its future strategy. Several references were made to the added value of TikTok for creating brand awareness and fostering brand loyalty among young people. During the annual presentation, it was evident that video content is performing exceptionally well within the news brand, and there are plans to actively promote video on the Meta and TikTok platforms alongside podcasts and the app in the future. This situation is in stark contrast to the layoffs that occurred within the editorial team. Due to budgetary constraints, the parent media company determined that the two news brands located in the same building should converge more significantly and operate under a unified line editorial team. Journalists are now expected to write their articles in a specific format with a prescribed word count. This makes it easier for the editorial team to fit the pieces into the newspaper without needing to make further adjustments themselves. The contrast between TikTok journalists, who operate with significant autonomy, and print journalists,

who are subject to an increasing number of regulations, becomes strikingly apparent in this context.

### *The challenge of the platform*

At the *social institution level*, we observe that the organization adapts to TikTok's platform guidelines, which shape what content can be shown and lead to excluding certain news stories. During our observations, much discussion centered on the algorithm—the “black box” everyone tries to understand but can't fully grasp. Editors rely on intuition, watching trends, posting at optimal times, and consistently feeding the algorithm with videos. While they want to figure it out, they admit these efforts often feel futile. At the start of our study, the team had just regained access to their account after a 6-week ban. A video about attacks on Swedish football supporters was flagged as a policy violation. Editors were surprised, noting other Flemish newsrooms used the same footage without penalties. “Although we could still create videos for Instagram, I felt temporarily unemployed,” one editor noted. Following the ban, editors became even more cautious about TikTok's content sensitivities, carefully weighing topics and footage. TikTok's ‘strikes’ system issues warnings for community guidelines violations, with three strikes risking a permanent ban. At the time of observation, the account had two strikes, one successfully appealed. This caused frustration and led to setting internal guidelines about which footage or topics to avoid. “I think platforms like TikTok need to cut us some slack, and they should allow it. If necessary, with a warning, with a disclaimer or whatever.” Although they strongly oppose this form of ‘censorship,’ they recognize there's little they can do. The account's large follower base is too valuable to risk losing. So, they tend to err on the side of caution. As a result, certain news stories are deliberately excluded to avoid possible sanctions from TikTok. This shows that the platform's sometimes opaque decisions directly influence the journalistic selection of news.

### **Conclusion and discussion**

This study investigated how TikTok production is integrated into the newsroom of *Gazet van Antwerpen*, identifying five key challenges related to diversity, adaptation, integration, profitability, and platform dynamics. While our findings confirm that platformization deeply shapes journalism, they also complicate and enrich existing theoretical accounts of how social media logics influence newsroom practices. Earlier scholarship has highlighted the increasing power of platform logics in shaping journalistic routines and values (e.g., [Hase et al., 2023](#); [Hermida and Mellado, 2020](#); [van Dijck and Poell, 2013](#)), suggesting news organizations must adapt wholesale to features such as algorithmic curation, audience metrics, and visual storytelling ([Anter, 2024](#); [Bell et al., 2017](#)). Our observations support this view in part: the TikTok team clearly works within platform constraints, optimizes for algorithmic visibility, and embraces TikTok's aesthetics of entertainment and informality. Editorial practices are shaped by the need to produce short, engaging, native content tailored to the platform's predominantly young audience. Yet our results show this adaptation is far from uniform or automatic. Instead, we found a

negotiated, contingent, and often improvised process. For example, at the individual level, TikTok journalists exercised meaningful agency in shaping their output. Diversity was not imposed from above but emerged as a personal and professional commitment, with editors consciously seeking to reflect the city's multicultural reality. These findings nuance prior research that tends to depict platform logic as deterministically reshaping journalism, by showing how individual values and identities can rework platform constraints toward public-interest goals. Similarly, while social media logic emphasizes audience engagement and popularity, TikTok journalists did not simply chase views at any cost. They navigated tensions between algorithmic demands and journalistic values such as objectivity, accuracy, and local relevance. The flexible, evolving routines we observed align with scholarship describing the professionalization of social media roles (e.g., Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc, 2018; Opgenhaffen and Hendrickx, 2024), but also reveal limits to institutionalization: the TikTok team's workflows remain largely self-directed and experimental, lacking formalized routines due to the algorithm's volatility and the platform's novelty within the organization. At the organizational level, our findings confirmed tensions identified in earlier studies between traditional news production and platform-driven innovation (e.g., García-Avilés et al., 2014; Waschková Císařová, 2024). While the TikTok team eventually secured buy-in from many colleagues—especially once its reach and impact became clear—this integration was uneven. Some older journalists resisted collaboration, reflecting generational divides in platform familiarity and professional identity. Yet over time, TikTok journalism became better integrated into newsroom routines, with practices such as flagging “TikTok-proof” stories and sharing production resources across departments and brands. This suggests platformization is not a one-way imposition, but a negotiated organizational transformation shaped by internal dynamics, professional hierarchies, and intergenerational learning. These insights are consistent with the findings of Humayun and Ferrucci (2022), who suggest that many uses of social media gradually become normalized within journalistic practice over time. Our findings also align with the German study by Degen et al. (2024), which shows that journalists actively navigate a balance between maintaining journalistic integrity and adapting to TikTok's unique dynamics. Given the experimental and contingent nature of TikTok news within news organizations, we argue that it is especially important to systematically compare findings across studies conducted in different contexts, countries, and journalistic cultures.

The market-oriented challenge of profitability also deserves emphasis. Unlike Facebook, platforms like TikTok and Instagram offer little direct revenue generation, complicating justifications for investment. Editors were acutely aware of their precarious position, recognizing they might be expendable in budget cuts because their work does not directly “pay for itself.” This underscores the economic tensions underlying social media journalism, confirming prior research on the uneasy alliance between journalistic and commercial imperatives (Lischka, 2021; Tandoc and Vos, 2016). However, our findings also highlight how management increasingly sees TikTok's value for brand awareness and loyalty among young audiences—a long-term strategic benefit that may not yield immediate profits but is essential for audience renewal. At the social institution level, our study foregrounded the role of platform governance—specifically opaque

moderation policies and the threat of sanctions. Editors described their struggles with understanding TikTok's "black box" algorithm and adjusting content to avoid policy violations, especially after an account ban created anxiety about losing hard-won followers. This led to internal self-censorship and cautious content strategies. While platformization literature often focuses on audience metrics and technical affordances, our results underscore the importance of platform governance as a structural constraint shaping editorial choices. This dynamic echoes concerns about "platform censorship" while illustrating how newsrooms develop pragmatic, sometimes reluctant, adaptations to stay viable on privately governed infrastructures.

For practitioners, these insights have clear implications. News organizations should recognize that TikTok is not just an additional distribution channel but demands platform-specific production values, storytelling approaches, and staff roles. Investing in dedicated, diverse, and skilled TikTok teams is essential, but so is fostering cross-departmental collaboration to integrate social media production into broader editorial workflows. Leadership should support experimentation while also providing quality standards, training, and resources that help manage tensions between platform demands and journalistic values. Organizations must also plan strategically for TikTok's limited direct monetization, viewing it as part of a broader brand-building effort rather than an immediate revenue stream. For TikTok teams specifically, this study suggests the importance of combining creative freedom with professional values, maintaining authenticity while adapting to platform aesthetics. Investing in diverse talent helps build audience trust and relevance, especially with underrepresented groups. At the same time, teams need to advocate internally for their role and value, demonstrating impact not only through views but by expanding audience engagement and supporting the brand's future sustainability. For journalism scholars, our findings underline the value of ethnographic and production-focused studies that go beyond content analysis to explore the negotiated realities of social media journalism. The Hierarchy of Influences model proved especially useful for revealing how individual agency, organizational structures, social institutions, and macro-level platform governance intersect to shape news production. Future research could build on this by comparing different news organizations, exploring how these dynamics evolve over time, or examining other emerging platforms. Researchers might also study how newsrooms develop collective strategies to resist or reshape platform pressures while maintaining their journalistic mission. Overall, this study demonstrates that while platformization exerts powerful influence on newsrooms, it is not a monolithic or deterministic process. Instead, producing journalism for TikTok involves ongoing negotiation between professional values, commercial pressures, technological affordances, and platform governance. Understanding these complexities is essential for both researchers and practitioners seeking to navigate the evolving landscape of social media news.

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## Informed consent

All participants signed informed consent statements.

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