

“Jump in and be Part of the Fun”. How U.S. News Providers Use and Adapt to TikTok.

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Social media platforms generally experience increased significance as news aggregators and providers (Hermida, 2016) mainly because younger audiences are turning to non-linear online services as information resources. According to Pew Research, 68 percent of Americans occasionally get their news through social media platforms, most frequently from Facebook (43%) and Gen Z users mostly consume Instagram and Snapchat as social media news resources (Matsa & Shearer, 2018). A 2020 Pew Research study reveals a quarter of U.S. adults get their news from YouTube where news organizations and independent channels are equally present and popular (Stocking et al., 2020).

In the context of decreasing advertising revenue and declining circulation (Pew Research Center, 2019), print newspapers are moving to social media platforms to appeal to digital native audiences and to adapt new financing models (Reuters Institute, 2020). While many print and of course digital news providers are maintaining various social media presences, ‘social media news’ usually means aggregated news feed content (Bode, 2016) rather than frequenting single news provider accounts (Hermida et al., 2012). In addition, online news content is increasingly shifting from text-based information to visual and audiovisual content. Therefore, news providers are adapting new visual strategies in editing and presenting news content (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019) while also trying to create new and trending PR and branding models (Vázquez-Herrero, Direito-Rebollal & López-García, 2019). In the U.S., the *New*

York Times, *The Washington Post*, and perhaps *USA Today* are the only national print newspapers with a significant weekly online reach (Reuters Institute, 2020).

In this context, this paper analyzes the presence of news providers on TikTok, currently the most popular and fastest growing social media platform (Kennedy, 2020). It takes a first look on how especially print legacy newspapers present video content on their TikTok accounts and how they adapt to the aesthetic and communicative standards and features of short-form video as a recently trending social media artifact. TikTok is designed as a video entertainment platform where users can create and share short music-based videos (Klug, 2020; Lu, Lu & Liu, 2020; Zhou, 2019) using app features like filters, caption, or hashtags (Anderson, 2020; Bresnick, 2019) to reference viral phenomena in the context of digital youth culture and everyday offline lifeworlds (Medina Serrano, Papakyriakopoulos & Hegelich, 2020).

For this study, we found a total of 89 U.S. news provider accounts on TikTok, 46 legacy newspaper accounts, meaning newspapers that originate in print, and 31 digital native news outlet accounts, meaning news providers that originate and circulate only online as websites and/or apps (Wu, 2016). The analysis shows that of the 46 legacy newspaper accounts all but three have either no videos (25) or less than 50 videos (18) (Fig. 1) and only six accounts have more than 500 followers (Fig. 2). The inactive accounts are largely regional legacy newspapers who may have secured their TikTok handle but never started using it for unknown reasons. Only a few regional newspapers maintained a trendy TikTok account for some time, for example, *The Dallas Morning News* ([@dallasmorningnews](#)), but quickly died out. Currently, the *Florida Times-Union* ([@jaxdotcom](#)) is the only active regional newspaper account producing trendy TikTok content on a weekly basis, yet they only have about 300 followers. Of the Top Ten most circulated print newspapers, only *USA Today* ([@usatoday](#)), *The Washington Post* ([@washingtonpost](#)), and the *New York Post* ([@nypost](#)) maintain popular, active, and highly followed TikTok accounts.

Number of Videos

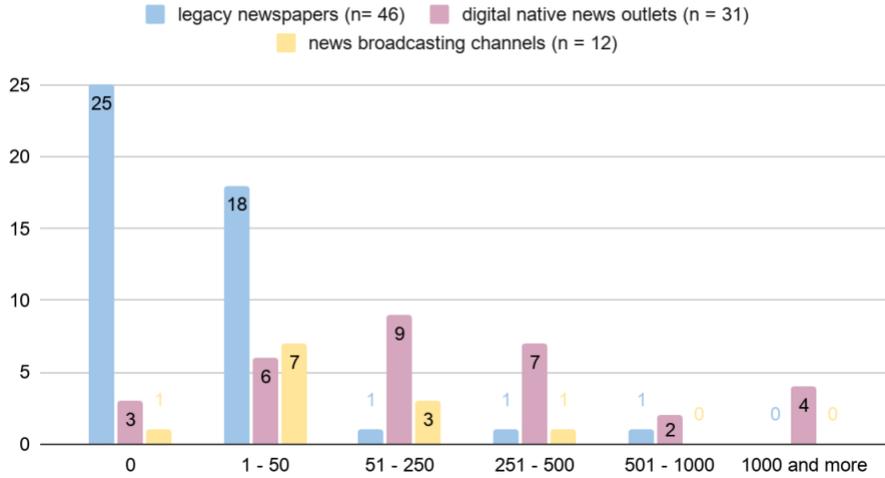


Fig. 1: Number of videos per news provider accounts on TikTok

Number of Followers

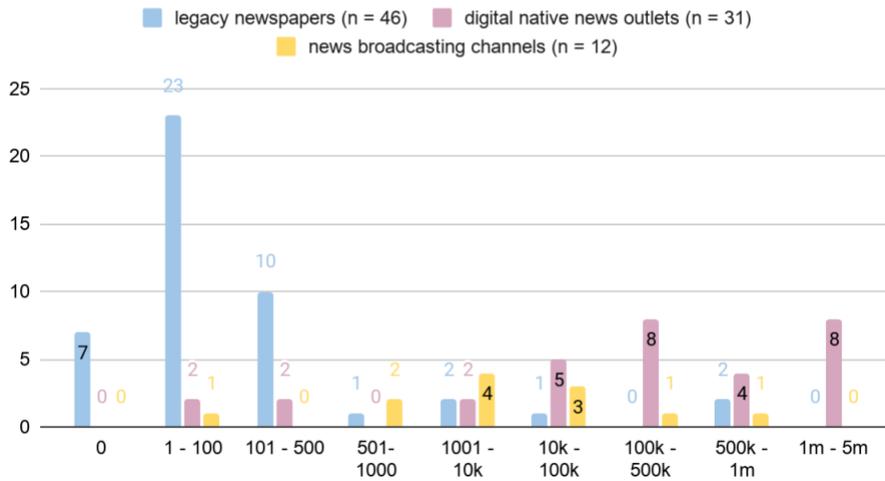


Fig. 2: Number of followers per news provider accounts on TikTok

The *New York Times* which is the most frequented print newspaper online has no noteworthy TikTok presence. The *Los Angeles Times* ([@latimes](https://www.instagram.com/latimes)) account, for example, was only active for three days in January 2020, eventually to test TikTok but was quickly abandoned.

	<i>account</i>	<i>videos</i>	<i>followers</i>
1	USA Today	279	704.1k
2	Washington Post	513	644.3k
3	New York Post	188	21.9k
4	New York Times	36	1280
5	Los Angeles Times	12	191
6	Wall Street Journal	0	102
7	Boston Globe	1	33
8	Newsday	0	13
9	Chicago Tribune	0	11
10	Star Tribune	0	5

Fig. 3: Number of videos and followers for the accounts of the Top Ten U.S. print newspapers

In contrast, the 31 digital native news outlets are much more popular and frequented. Four accounts each have more than 1000 videos, 8 accounts have more than one million followers. The main reason is that digital native news outlets are largely specialized on soft news areas, such as sports (for example *Bleacher Report* ([@bleacherreport](#))), lifestyle (for example *Bustle* ([@bustle](#))), or gaming (for example *IGN* ([@ign](#))). Therefore, they almost exclusively post branded content. As part of digital native news outlets, current affairs news providers are hardly represented. We found only six TikTok accounts that are actually reporting on current affairs or politics. And only *Now This* ([@nowthis](#)), who are known for exclusively operating on social media, and its spin-out *Now This Politics* ([@nowthispolitics](#)), have lots of content and many followers (Fig. 4).

Other news-related providers are rather hybrid, most prominently *BuzzFeed* ([@buzzfeed](#)), who are a mixture of entertainment, soft news, and current affairs. Their subsidiary *BuzzFeed News* ([@buzzfeednews](#)) is not really active or frequented on TikTok. There is also *Vice News* ([@vice](#)) who are known for documentaries and “under-reported” stories. But their TikTok account is actually mostly videos in which they recap funny or weird stories in the style of commenting on them.

	<i>account</i>	<i>videos</i>	<i>followers</i>
1	Now This	338	2m
2	Now This Politics	249	969.9k
3	HuffPost	18	55.2k
4	VICE News	36	19.8k
5	BuzzFeed News	47	3076
6	Quicktake by Bloomberg	0	1317

Fig. 4: Number of videos and followers for digital native news outlet accounts that focus on politics and current affairs

To give a first conclusion: TikTok is a new, trendy, and fast growing social media platform that allows to reach young people and to create monetary revenue. Yet, in the light of increasing news access via social media, legacy and current affairs news providers are not yet present on TikTok. More research needs to be done into TikTok strategies of news providers as part of their social media strategies. But for now, the focus is on the three most active and followed TikTok accounts of legacy newspapers, namely *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, and *New York Post*. In the following, this paper will exemplify their main types of video content and presentation styles.

We analyzed the last 15 TikTok videos of each account, and found that *USA Today* and *The Washington Post* mostly post original content in the style of performative videos. That means, new video content intentionally created for TikTok use that mostly shows a person talking, acting, or reacting. And in both cases, the person is the social media editor of the newspaper (Fig. 5). An example from *USA Today* shows music-based video creation and lip syncing as a characteristic performance element for TikTok videos (Fig. 5). In contrast, the *New York Post*, largely posted pre-existing content in the style of illustrative videos, that is, content that was not created for TikTok in the form of slideshows to music or sound to inform about a current event. In this example, the video is about the New York Mets and the Miami Marlins showing support to protest social injustice (Fig. 5).

We can identify performative and illustrative as main presentation styles for the most followed legacy newspaper accounts. The two very active and popular legacy newspaper accounts are adapting a presentation style that is characteristic for TikTok as a short-form video medium over the conveying and communicating of news-related information. TikTok allows up to 60 seconds long videos, which is suitable for a short news segment. But we found only very few videos of the three accounts were narrative, in the sense that they presented a coherent visual storyline, using pre-existing video material and voice-over spoken information on a current affair subject.

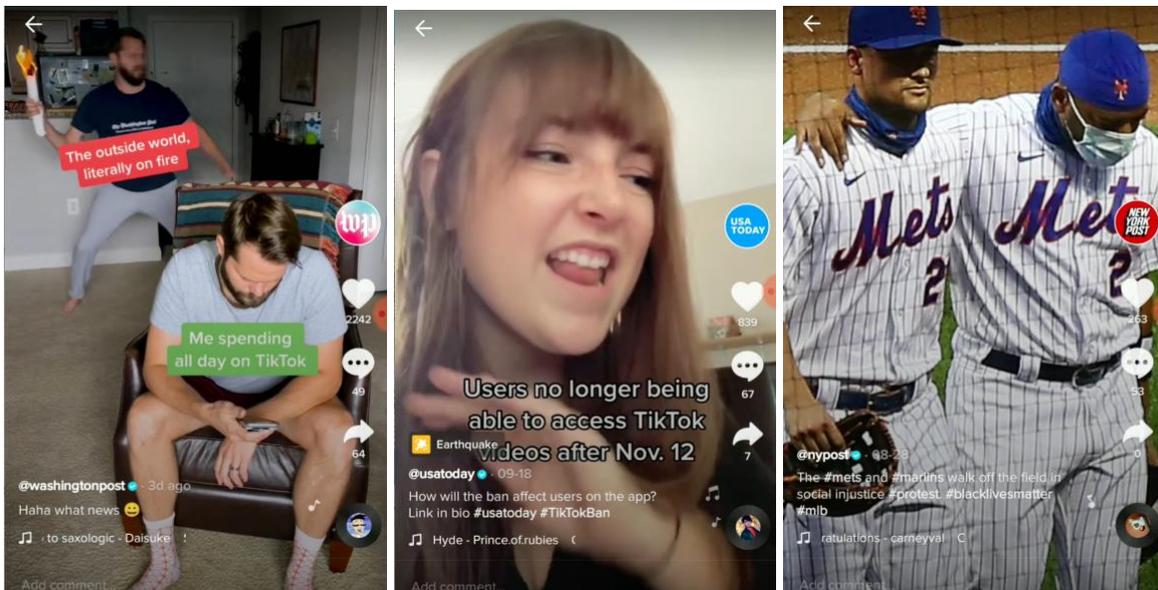


Fig. 5: Screenshots of TikTok videos by *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and the *New York Post*

Based on such forms of addressing viewers and illustrating subjects in the context of TikTok and social media, significant differences can be identified in the relation between presentation style and news content. *New York Post* videos covered a large variety of soft news subjects like sports, entertainment, or fashion, and rarely serious or timely political subjects. They used additional text elements to explain the illustrative video content and added hashtags in reference to the addressed subject or person in the video. *The Washington Post* videos were largely created in a characteristic TikTok style of viral short-form videos and rarely related to any news. Most videos covered viral subjects or trends and were somehow

making self-referential puns on the culture of short-form videos or used this style to comment on current affairs in a jokey way ([example](#)). Text elements were largely used to create memes in context with the video content and trending sounds on TikTok ([example](#)). *USA Today* videos predominantly focused on health and the pandemic, the upcoming election, or current U.S. politics. Text elements were often added as closed captioning to underline and to highlight the spoken message ([example](#)). These videos were all created in the style of a direct address, meaning the person is either speaking directly into the camera to address the viewer or is performing lip syncing to connect the message of the video to a sound or audio file ([example](#)). Hashtags mostly referenced the news content of a video. Some videos used trendy TikTok filters or styles to combine viral presentation with current affair news content ([example](#)). So we see legacy news providers adapting to the style of short-form video and also making use of already known elements, such as a form of direct address to communicate news information.

We might assume that digital native news outlets use more viral or short-form video elements. But the example of *Now This* demonstrates that digital news providers who tend to be more social media savvy are in fact producing serious informative content on TikTok ([example](#)). And the same is actually true for some news broadcasters, such as *NBC News* ([example](#)). They actually used TikTok to post short news segments based on pre-existing news material, but the example of *NBC News* as well shows how established news broadcasters try to appeal to social media native audiences by reporting on sensational or bizarre side issues, such as city council hearing on a boneless wings petition ([example](#)).

This first analysis shows that established national newspapers can utilize TikTok to expand their brand. But it is yet to be determined if this also results in monetary revenue and audience growth and therefore will become a variant of short news reporting or digital journalism. At the same time, TikTok is primarily a platform for viral content and short-term entertainment and not a forum for serious or weightier subjects. And short-form videos limit the ability to present news and information in larger contexts beyond a headline or teaser. So one strategy can be to simply “jump in and be part of the fun” - a 2019 quote by Dave Jorgensen, the “Washington Post TikTok guy” (Beaujon, 2019). And it can also be a strategy for journalists to maintain personal TikTok accounts ([example](#), [example](#)) as another outlet to

reach audiences (Gulyas, 2017) – especially when they work for large news agencies such as *CNN*, *BBC*, *New York Times*, or *CBS* that are currently not present on TikTok.

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