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Research Paper

MMC5305

April 9, 2023

## **Research Proposal**

TikTok is a social media platform that has been sweeping the nation, let alone the world, for years now. However, as the popularity of the app increases, new users lead to new ways that the app is being used. The types of videos posted on the app are constantly evolving, and one type of content that is now often posted is real-world news and journalism. This can be shown in different ways, such as recordings of news aired on TV stations, people speaking on their experiences with current events, or even professional journalists speaking on the app.

This research paper will aim to express the influence of TikTok on international and national journalism. Social media, specifically TikTok has a large impact on today's society. Still, through thorough research, this paper will examine how the availability of TikTok affects the way that users obtain news, and how professional journalism sources are no longer the prominent way. Through the evaluation of peer-reviewed journals and scholarly articles, this paper will focus on these effects that are occurring both in the US and the UK and will argue that

teenagers and adults now use TikTok as a primary news source. Using both quantitative and qualitative data collected throughout the research process, a well-researched argument will be produced.

In addition, the paper will dive into the detriments of relying on TikTok as a primary news source, and why users should be aware of the news and content they absorb. With TikTok regulations being fairly loose, it can be very easy to encounter fake news or videos that don't show the full story.

Overall, this paper will express and evaluate the statistics of TikTok usage as a primary news source, and why this may not be a stable addition to society.

## **Theory and Research**

For many users both in the US and the UK, TikTok is a primary source of daily news. I would like first to generally explore the use of social media platforms to read and review news both in the US and the UK. I will also explore why researchers believe that using social media as a news source is a negative thing.

## **Background Numbers**

In the UK, the BBC is the largest public broadcaster and for years was where most people in the UK would access their news from. However, more recent research shows that just 24% of adults in the UK are following or using traditional

media outlets like the BBC. A survey that was conducted by OFCOM, which is the UK's communications regulator, showed that 44% of people get news from "people that they follow" and 25% of Gen Z and Millennials get their news from specifically TikTok.

According to the data from the Pew Research Center, even though there continue to be problems with fake news on social media accounts, a large portion of Americans still rely on social media platforms for news. According to a Pew Research Center study that was conducted in mid-2020, over half of US adults use social media "sometimes" or "often" as their news source. It is interesting that even though so many Americans use social media as a news source, a YouGov study found that only 14% of people in the US trusted news on social media. My question is why is relying on social media as a prominent news source a bad thing?

### Why not?

I feel that in order to understand why this topic is so important, it is crucial that I dive into research as to why relying on social media platforms as a news source is not reliable. A Pew Research study conducted in July 2020 showed that adults who were receiving their current news from social media platforms knew less about the presidential election that was going on at the time, and about the coronavirus. It was also concluded that users who relied on social media platforms

for news were more susceptible to receiving made-up or fake news. According to Greg Burns from the Northwestern Local News Initiative, “Journalists say social-media platforms have hurt their industry, contributing to inaccurate and one-sided news accounts by exerting too much control over the mix of news that people see, according to a recent survey.” I am not surprised that journalists feel this way about social media news. It is not rare to see users on social media platforms taking information that journalists have worked to collect and changing words around before posting it on their own social media. This is one of the many ways that fake news is easily created and distributed. TikTok has a very strong and personalized algorithm that has the primary goal of entertaining and keeping the user engaged by providing quality and accurate information.

### Is it all so negative?

Although there is a plethora of research that is against the use of social media as a news platform, there is some research out there supporting the other side. Because of social media platforms, news has now traveled across the world faster than ever. Especially when it comes to breaking news, there has never been a faster way to spread a story so quickly. Smartphones and mobile electronics allow journalists to be able to share current news with the world from wherever they may be. As soon as an event occurs, users have the ability to post personal footage or

repost someone else's. TikTok's algorithm also boosts trending topics, which can help to push information even farther, even faster. This has definitely added to the globalization of breaking news and can help get out important information to many different audiences.

However, it is important to remember that modern technology allows photos and videos to be edited without the edits being able to be detected. This is when the high speed of the spread of content can become a problem, which I will now dive deeper into.

### Fake News

According to researchers from the University of Michigan, fake news can be described as “those news stories that are false: the story itself is fabricated, with no verifiable facts, sources or quotes. Sometimes these stories may be propaganda that is intentionally designed to mislead the reader, or may be designed as “clickbait” written for economic incentives”. Especially in today's current social media culture, it is common for people to want to do anything to go viral on a social media platform. Because of this urge to gain a lot of views in a short period of time, people are willing to fabricate fake stories that could be seen by viewers as true. With few regulations and a way to fact-check on social media platforms, it is now harder than ever to tell what is true or not true.

## My analysis

Based on the research I have found, social media should not be relied on as a prominent news source. The lack of regulations created an easy path for fake news to spread. In my opinion, what is the point of even keeping up with the current news if what you are consuming is not even accurate? I think that because of the current trend of so many users wanting to go viral, the creation of fake news will continue to occur. I also feel that a user wanting to go viral is not the only reason that fake news gets spread. As I previously discussed, there is research that supports the positive side of using social media as a news source. The argument for the positive side is that breaking news can be shared with the world quicker than ever. I, however, see this as yet another negative side. If the news is being shared with the world as it is happening, there is a large possibility that information is being shared before all of the facts are known. This, although a more unintentional way, is still a way that fake news becomes spread with the world.

Throughout the bulk of this research paper, I will continue to dive into the use of social media as a news source, more specifically TikTok. I will also focus my research on specifically the US and the UK, and compare the app usage as a news source in those two locations. I will continue to dive into the effects of fake

news, and why it is important that we are aware of the information that we are consuming, especially on social media apps, like TikTok.

## **Research Paper**

### **The beginning**

I feel that in order to gain a deep understanding of this topic, it is important to understand how social media platforms as news sources even came to be. We first started to see small bits of informational communication occurring in 1999 when blogs and other early forms of social digital communication began. In 2003 MySpace launched, with many more platforms following in the years to come. Now, there are many modern social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and many more. These platforms are used for many different purposes. Users post anything from funny dancing videos to vacation pictures, to marketing for businesses, to breaking news. Social media is everywhere. It has become an essential part of many peoples' days. With people spending so much time on these platforms, it was only a matter of time before people started finding more reasons to scroll aimlessly on their devices. In addition to using these platforms for entertainment purposes, today, people now use social media as a

news source as well. If you think about it, it makes sense. These platforms are easily accessible and right at our fingertips. Out of all of the platforms that I have previously mentioned, this research paper will focus on the statistics of TikTok as a news source in the UK and US, as well as the detriments of this.

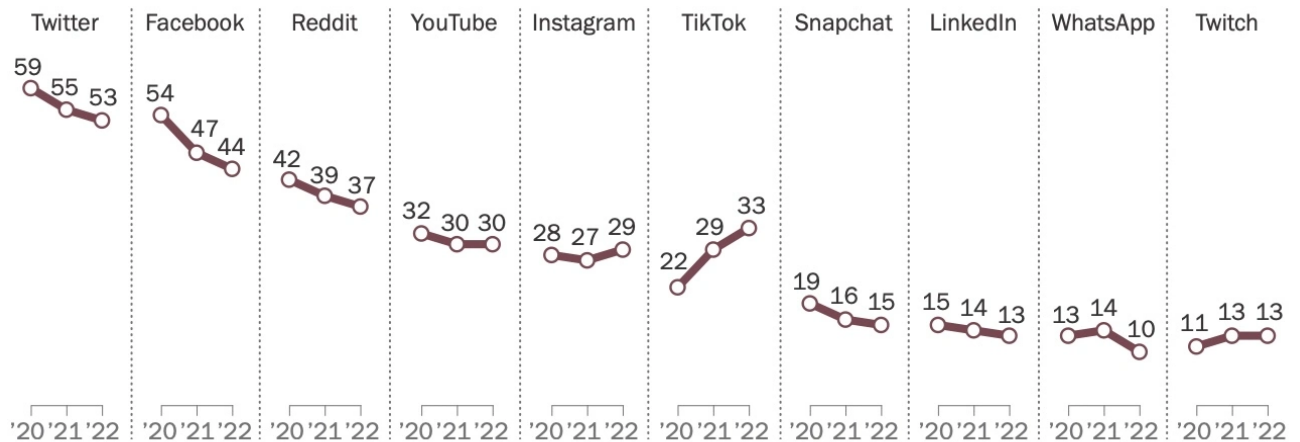
### The numbers

In the United States alone, there are over 150 million people that use TikTok. Out of those 150 million US users, it was reported by the Pew Research Center that over 33% of them get their news from TikTok. In 2020, this number was only 22%. This visual that was pulled from the Pew Research Center can really help us to visualize how TikTok for news usage is rising, while the use of other social media platforms is declining.



## Social media sites by portion of users who regularly get news there

% of each social media site's users who *regularly* get news there



Note: Nextdoor was first asked about this year so there is no trend data.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 18-31, 2022.

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TikTok's interface allows users to really personalize their experience with the app and the algorithm is very accurate in building a "for you page" filled with videos that the user will want to watch. This not only leads to hours of scrolling a day, but it keeps the user wanting to come back for more. Over time, this habitual environment has led to more and more users finding themselves constantly reaching for their devices to scroll some more on the app.

In the UK, there are over 23 million TikTok users and, according to a recent Ofcom news consumption survey, about 4 million UK users rely on TikTok as a news source. This survey helped to discover that TikTok was the fastest-growing news source from 2020 to 2022. What I find interesting is that the survey also discovered that 71% of people who consume news in the UK primarily trust TV news, while only 35% said they trust social media platforms.

Comparing the numbers from both the US and the UK, a larger percentage of Americans rely on TikTok as a primary news source, however, the numbers in both places continue to rise. It is also important to remember that, in both places, it is not only adults that are starting to rely on TikTok as a news source. It is users across all age groups, starting at just age 13. I feel that this is important to keep in mind, as the argument and analysis I make are not specific to just one age range, but are in fact becoming a commonality across many age groups.

### Why TikTok?

What is leading people to choose TikTok as a news source instead of TV news or a newspaper? It all comes back to one large factor: our attention spans. TikTok's interface mimics a fast-paced environment. It is definitely important to mention that one's attention span is a complex construct that is influenced by a range of factors, including individual differences and environmental factors. While social media may be one factor that can impact attention span, it is not the only cause. However, the addictive feeling of quick scrolling and the release of dopamine over time has made it more desirable for users to consume content at a very fast pace. The average length of a TikTok video is actually only about 30 seconds, and users often don't even watch the entirety of the video before scrolling to the next. This has resulted in people choosing to consume news from TikTok.

Consuming news from TikTok has allowed people to gain their desired knowledge in a shorter period of time and at their fingertips.

### Misinformation

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, misinformation is “incorrect or misleading information”. The concern with an increase in the number of people getting their news from TikTok is the idea that there is a lot of misinformation out there. It can often be hard to know that all of the news one is getting from TikTok is truly accurate.

According to Emma Tucker from CNN, a report from the researchers at NewsGuard stated that TikTok “repeatedly delivered videos containing false claims in the first 20 results, often within the first five”. The report also stated that TikTok’s search engine “is consistently feeding millions of young users health misinformation, including some claims that could be dangerous to users’ health.”

A good example of widespread misinformation on TikTok in both the US and the UK is the false information that was spreading during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the heat of the pandemic, users were posting false information about vaccines in order to sway viewers away from getting vaccinated. One specific viral video was trying to convince viewers that any doctor that was promoting the vaccine was just being paid by the pharmaceutical companies to do

so. In this viral video, the user avoided using terminology like “COVID-19” or “vaccines” in order to avoid being flagged or reviewed by TikTok’s technology which is designed to filter out misinformation. It was not uncommon to see different users using this technique in order to bypass the technology and keep their video up.

In September 2021, NewsGuard conducted a study in order to determine if children were being exposed to misinformation about COVID-19 on TikTok. After analyzing screen recordings of the children scrolling through TikTok for some time, 88.89% were shown misinformation related to COVID-19 and 66.67% were shown misinformation specific to COVID-19 vaccines within the first 35 minutes of scrolling through the app. This is just one topic that was being analyzed, but there could be so much more misinformation out there that kids and adults may not even realize.

Whether it’s about COVID-19 or any other topic, children are often being exposed to misinformation. While some adults may be able to filter out some of the misinformation that they consume, it may be harder for children to do so. Young children are being exposed to deep topics and high levels of unfiltered information prematurely. Parents should be aware of what their children are consuming on

TikTok and should discuss with their children how to be responsible and aware while viewing content.

In March 2021, a TikTok video was released in the UK claiming that the US was responsible for the physical destruction of Syria and it was spreading rapidly on the app. This video filled with false information gained over 2 million likes. There are videos like this being spread throughout the world every day, gaining millions of likes.

With thousands of videos being posted on the app every minute, it is nearly impossible to control the accuracy of information and news posted on the app. In September 2022, Cormac Keenan, Head of Trust and Safety at TikTok made a press release addressing the misinformation issue within the TikTok environment. Below is an excerpt from that press release.

*“Misinformation is not a new problem, but the internet provides a new avenue to an old challenge. We recognize the impact misinformation can have in eroding trust in public health, electoral processes, facts, and science. We are committed to being part of the solution. We treat misinformation with the utmost seriousness and take a multi-pronged approach to stopping it from spreading, while elevating authoritative information and investing in digital literacy education to help get ahead of the problem at scale.”*

The efforts being put forth by TikTok do not go unnoticed, but it is uncertain how effective the efforts really are.

It is important to remember that because TikTok is such a globalized app, what happens on the app in one country, is occurring in other parts of the world as well. In both the US and the UK, government officials have been asked to remove TikTok from their mobile devices. Both countries had reports of misinformation during COVID-19, and both countries still see misinformation within the app today.

### What can be done?

Now that I have dived deeper into what misinformation on TikTok is, it is important to understand that the fact that so many users in both the US and the UK are relying on TikTok as a primary news source is not all that good. While these users may just see it as a quick and efficient way to understand what is currently going on in the world, it is much more than that. Users who use TikTok as a news source should try their best to commit to fact-checking. For example, when one sees a video of a political statement or a current event somewhere, that user should then take the extra time to research a bit further in order to try to ensure that the news they are consuming is accurate. If they discover that the information they

consumed on TikTok is false, they should report the video to TikTok for being misinformation, and then the video will be further reviewed, and possibly even be taken down.

Another way to be more responsible while viewing news on TikTok is to be aware of who's content you are viewing. Many news stations and news reporters have started their own TikTok pages where they post the same or similar news stories that are being aired on the TV stations. Viewing news from these accounts instead of a less reliable source is a good way to try and avoid consuming misinformation.

The more people commit to being aware of the news that they are consuming on TikTok, the more accurate the app's information could potentially become.

### Concluding Thoughts

TikTok has the ability to make news and important information spread fast than ever and at the ease of the user's fingertips. The rise in users relying on TikTok as a news source doesn't seem to be stopping anytime soon in the US or the UK and across all age groups. However, with that, it is important to be reminded of misinformation and to remind users to be aware of the content that they are consuming and sharing further.

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