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Faour, Layal

Citation

Faour, L. (2024). *How News Workers Develop Strategies Based on Their Understanding of TikTok's Algorithm?: Exploring the relationship between algorithmic folk theories of news workers and their editorial decision making processes: TikTok as a case study.*

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

How News Workers Develop Strategies Based on Their Understanding of TikTok's Algorithm?

Exploring the relationship between algorithmic folk theories of news workers and their editorial decision making processes: TikTok as a case study

Loyal Faour

S3746224

University of Leiden

Thesis MA Journalism and New Media

Supervisor: Dr. Tomás Dodds

Second reader: Dr. Willem Koetsenruijter

15-06-2024

Wordcount: 8309

Abstract

Social media has emerged as a crucial channel for news dissemination, prompting news outlets to utilize these platforms to reach their audiences effectively. Platforms such as TikTok have gained prominence among younger demographics, leading news workers to adapt their content to align with the platform's algorithmic logic. This thesis investigates how news workers develop strategies informed by their understanding of TikTok's opaque algorithm to shape their editorial decision-making process. By exploring the relationship between news workers' algorithmic folk theories and their editorial practices on TikTok, this thesis sheds light on the impact of journalists' algorithmic folk theories on news production processes.

1. Introduction

The initial optimism surrounding the widespread adoption of social media platforms was deeply intertwined with visions of a technologically empowered future, where collective intelligence of online communities would challenge traditional hierarchies and centralizations of power (Grandinetti & Bruinsma, 2023). As Poster (1995) suggests, communication systems are often perceived as a hopeful means of improving quality of life and fostering social justice. This optimism reached its peak during the Arab Spring, where social media played a pivotal role in facilitating protests for democracy in various countries across the Middle East and Northern Africa (Grandinetti & Bruinsma, 2023). According to Poster (1995), the internet, serving as superhighways of information, holds political implications, providing new opportunities for speech and interaction within society. However, in recent years, this optimism has waned, giving way to concerns about the platforms' role in disseminating misinformation and conspiracy theories such as stories filled with speculation about alien autopsies, faked moon landings, and the true assassin of JFK (Grandinetti & Bruinsma, 2023). These contemporary narratives lack evidence yet effectively mobilize fervent followers to doubt the legitimacy of elections or the safety of vaccinations (Grandinetti & Bruinsma, 2023). This highlights the importance of social media platforms as a source of information.

Social media has become a vital source of news for audiences, leading news outlets to turn to these platforms to effectively reach their target audience (Peterson-Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020). A significant amount of traffic to news outlets' websites is generated by social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Broersma & Graham, 2015). Furthermore, social media provide an accessible space for an endless number of potential sources and information. Therefore, news outlets have rapidly adopted social media and integrated them into newsroom practices (Broersma & Graham, 2015). The adoption of social media by news outlets becomes inevitable, especially when targeting younger generations. As indicated by Bruns and Nuernbergk (2019), studies suggest that the consumption of news through traditional mass media has significantly declined in many nations. Furthermore, it has been observed that younger audiences predominantly rely on news consumption via social media platforms (Hase et al., 2023).

Consequently, news outlets have adapted their content to align with the logic of social media platforms (Hase et al., 2023). For instance, studies suggest that on Facebook, news outlets choose "softer" articles and adjust the language of news to enhance engagement in line with the platform's logic (Hase et al., 2023). While some argue that social media merely

serves as a new tool in the journalist's toolkit, others suggest that it prompts changes in professional norms, encouraging transparency, humor, responsiveness among reporters (Broersma & Graham, 2015). Accordingly, concerns have been raised regarding the control that social media platforms exert over news. On one hand, social media, through their algorithms, play a pivotal role in directing audience traffic to news organization websites (Meese & Hurcombe, 2021). On the other hand, they also influence the shaping of news stories through the strategies journalists develop to adapt to the logic of these platforms (Meese & Hurcombe, 2021). Furthermore, the algorithms and platform dynamics, such as those of Facebook, are constantly evolving, necessitating news organizations to continuously update and vary their strategies in order to succeed on these platforms (Meese & Hurcombe, 2021). While some researchers raised inquiries regarding the impact of social media on the norms and values of journalism as a profession, suspecting that it may lead to the adoption of the priorities and values of these platforms, others perceive these platforms as a promising means for reaching a wider audience and as a lifeline for an economically troubled industry (Meese & Hurcombe, 2021). Nonetheless, the presence of news organizations on social media has become inevitable and is expanding to include relatively new platforms such as TikTok.

TikTok, developed by ByteDance in China in 2016, has swiftly emerged as a dominant force in social media, particularly among Generation Z (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). This platform offers a vast global collection of 15-second video clips (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Unlike its predecessors such as Instagram and Twitter, TikTok's influence has been unparalleled, as highlighted by the New York Times with the headline "How TikTok is Rewriting the World" (Henneman, 2020). TikTok is described as more of a creative media platform than a conventional social media outlet, TikTok provides users with a virtual playground for creative expression (Anderson, 2020). While initially perceived as a platform for superficial content, TikTok has evolved to encompass a wide range of topics, including social and political issues such as Black Lives Matter and the Covid-19 pandemic, prompting recognition as a legitimate news source (Newman, 2022). Consequently, journalists and news organizations are increasingly adopting TikTok to reach younger audiences (Newman, 2022).

What sets TikTok apart from other social media platforms is its highly algorithm-driven nature. Its algorithm enables users, regardless of their follower count, to swiftly build an audience as their content appears in other users' feeds (Anderson, 2020). However, the opacity of TikTok's algorithm results in journalists and news organizations trying various strategies to succeed on it (Newman, 2022), shaped by their understanding of its algorithm.

News workers' subjective conceptualization of TikTok's algorithm and pathways to success on TikTok lead to the implementation of specific editing practices (Karizat et al., 2021), ultimately impacting the quality of news consumed by users (Bruns & Nuernbergk, 2019). This thesis explores the research question: How news workers develop strategies based on their understanding of the platform's algorithm? To achieve this, an empirical approach is taken by conducting 12 semi-structured interviews with newsroom professionals from two news organizations active on TikTok, NOS and RTL, aiming to delve into the decision-making process during the editing of news stories on TikTok.

2. Literature review

2.1 Journalism and Social media

Beyond serving as distribution channels, social media platforms have disrupted the traditional gatekeeping role of mainstream media and transformed the relationship between traditional media and audiences (Hase et al., 2023) on one hand, and between traditional media and politicians on the other (Broersma & Graham, 2015). Some argue that the gatekeeping role has transitioned from mass media to social media platforms in the digital age (Meese & Hurcombe, 2021). Digital media has emerged as a networked public sphere, where all users have equal power in generating and sharing content, a privilege previously exclusive to news outlets in the mass media era (Paulussen & A. Harder, 2014). The opportunity that social media equally provides for all users to create and disseminate information has resulted in the blurring of boundaries between journalists and readers, producers, and consumers (Paulussen & A. Harder, 2014). As Poster (1995, p.5) states "*The shift to a decentralized network of communications makes senders receivers, producers consumers, rulers ruled, upsetting the logic of understanding of the first media age*". This shift in power has altered the traditional gatekeeping role of journalists on one hand, while also changing the way audiences are perceived. They are now viewed as 'active recipients' rather than passive consumers (Paulussen & A. Harder, 2014). Moreover, social media have disrupted the power dynamics between the press and politics. In the mass media age, political actors and news reporters shared common interests; politicians relied on news outlets to disseminate their messages to the public, while news organizations used politicians' statements as sources (Broersma & Graham, 2015). This reciprocal relationship fostered a stable dynamic between journalists and politicians. However, this balance has been altered now that political actors can now independently broadcast information through social media. Furthermore, social media introduced a third actor into the political communication landscape, regular users, the

public, who were previously overlooked by journalists and politicians in the mass media age (Broersma & Graham, 2015). The ability for users to generate news content, thanks to social media, has resulted in journalists no longer being the sole news creators.

The possibility social media provide for regular users to actively participate in the online news landscape by shaping and posting news content has given rise to a new form of journalism known as 'citizen journalism' (Kim & Lowrey, 2015). As Johnston (2016) indicates "citizen journalism" changed newsgathering routines of news organizations as journalists used the user-generated content when covering conflicts. In instances such as the Syrian crisis, citizen journalists served as primary sources of information due to the closure of the country to international journalists and the inherent risks associated with reporting, including kidnapping and violence against journalists (Yousuf & Taylor, 2016). Consequently, international media outlets heavily relied on content produced by citizen journalists to report on unfolding events. Additionally, citizen journalists provided alternative perspectives and diverse interpretations of events, countering biased narratives propagated by government-controlled media, as in the Egyptian case (Arafa & Armstrong, 2016). Accordingly, it could be seen that social media outcomes such as user-generated content resulted in changes in the professionals' newsgathering routines adding new news sources.

Studies show that using social media and especially Twitter and Facebook became indispensable tool for journalists whether for politics and foreign news or sports and celebrity news (Paulussen & A. Harder, 2014). As Johnston (2016) indicates, the role social media played in the news landscape necessitated changes in newsroom practices. The use of social media as news platforms by news outlets and other users impacted the news industry in terms of production, distribution, consumption and how audiences are formed (Broersma & Eldridge, 2019). Social media has become an essential source of news, with journalists incorporating information gathered from these platforms into their stories across both traditional and digital media outlets (Johnston, 2016). Consequently, skills such as navigating social media platforms and integrating user-generated content into news coverage have become indispensable for journalists in the digital era (Johnston, 2016). However, these changes in newsrooms routines could raise questions about whether they have increased the quality of news.

Some studies argue that social media have not brought about profound changes in journalism, as they have been integrated into the practices and routines of traditional mass (Broersma & Graham, 2015). Although professional journalism has lost some of its grip on

news production and distribution, no longer holding a monopoly on these processes, the majority of news consumed daily is still produced by these news organizations, even on social media platforms (Domingo et al., 2015). Furthermore, studies describe platforms such as Twitter solely as beneficial tools that facilitate the news production process (Broersma & Graham, 2015). However, other studies indicate that the adoption of social media in newsrooms may lead to the violation of professional norms as journalists experiment in their attempts to succeed on these platforms (Broersma & Graham, 2015). These are the concerns Bruns and Nuernbergk (2019) addressed as 'lingering unease' regarding the decrease in the quality of journalistic coverage when attempting to adapt to the logic of social media. This change made it more challenging for professional journalists. Previously, they were the sole actors, acting as gatekeepers in the news production and dissemination landscape. However, they now find themselves in competition with other actors such as experts, politicians, commentators, and other stakeholders on social media (Bruns & Nuernbergk, 2019). Therefore, journalists realized that their success in reaching audiences in the current age depend on how much they understand and can deal with the new systems. As a result, journalists have come to recognize that their ability to reach audiences in the current age depends largely on their understanding of and ability to navigate these new digital systems.

2.2 TikTok, algorithm and journalism

TikTok, a short-video streaming application introduced in 2016 by the Chinese company ByteDance. It was merged with Musical.ly in 2018 (Anderson, 2020; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022) and quickly gained global recognition. TikTok swiftly garnered popularity worldwide, particularly among Generation Z users, while older users often struggled to understand it (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). However, the platform's exponential growth has not been without controversy, as concerns about censorship, cyberbullying, national security, and data privacy have surfaced (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). With its innovative features and user-friendly interface, TikTok facilitated the creation and sharing of short video clips, typically lasting 15 seconds (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022; Henneman, 2020; Yao, 2021), known as TikToks (Henneman, 2020). Users also have the option to connect several clips for a total recording of up to 60 seconds. Additionally, users may upload longer videos that were not recorded within the app (Henneman, 2020). By mid-2020, TikTok boasted over 100 million monthly active users in the United States alone (Henneman, 2020) and approximately 800 million active users worldwide by 2020 (Yao, 2021) marking a remarkable surge in popularity.

TikTok is known for its humorous and engaging presentation style, which makes it particularly appealing to younger generations (Newman, 2022). It was the most downloaded app in 2020, with over two billion downloads, and its vast user base, predominantly comprising young adults, with 60% of its users aged between 16 and 24, who spend considerable time engaging with its content (Grandinetti & Bruinsma, 2023). Offering a diverse range of content formats and tools, including music clips and special effects, TikTok empowered users to unleash their creativity and share their unique perspectives through short-form videos (Sari et al., 2024).

TikTok distinguishes itself as primarily driven by algorithms (Anderson, 2020). The significance of algorithms lies in their role in determining the content to which users are exposed (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Its algorithm is addictive, providing users with an unlimited flow of short, entertaining videos (Newman, 2022). Algorithms are traditionally defined as mathematical or logical sets of instructions, but when it comes to social media, the term refers to various machine learning AI processes (Grandinetti & Bruinsma, 2023). The user experience on TikTok is significantly influenced by the platform's vague recommendation algorithm and visibility moderation practices (Lerat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023), setting it apart from other platforms based on following and followers (Anderson, 2020).

TikTok's algorithm tailors recommendations for each user, presenting videos on the 'For You' page upon opening the app. This fosters continuous consumption, often described as an "anaesthetic effect," resulting in extended periods of engagement driven by curiosity, often without users being fully conscious of their activity (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Despite concerns about trustworthiness, users find the platform's presentation and experience addictive (Newman, 2022). Data-driven algorithms on platforms such as TikTok structure content recommendations, advertising, and moderation. Despite this, platforms heavily depend on a concealed layer of human labor known as "ghost work" (Grandinetti & Bruinsma, 2023).

The opaque nature of these algorithms, often referred to as black boxes (Dogruel, 2021), raises concerns about their impact on news media organizations, which increasingly depend on platform algorithms for audience traffic (Meese & Hurcombe, 2021). In contrast to platforms such as Facebook or Instagram, where only content from followed accounts is typically shown, TikTok relies heavily on its recommendation algorithm. Therefore, the strategic use of hashtags is crucial for categorizing content and engaging in challenges and

trends (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Despite their crucial role, algorithms' opacity leads to feelings of mystery and powerlessness among users (Grandinetti & Bruinsma, 2023). However, trying to succeed on TikTok, despite its complicated algorithm, becomes crucial for news organizations who target younger audiences.

TikTok has garnered growing scholarly interest as a space for examining political discourse, engagement and activism in the youth political lives (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023). TikTok is increasingly used by older participants. However, more than 80% of its content creators worldwide are under 25 years old (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023). In the first few years of its emergence, the prevailing belief was that TikTok was a platform primarily associated with superficial content, such as funny or musical memes. However employing it by users for issues such as Black Lives Matter, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine helped recognizing it as news source as well (Newman, 2022). The platform has become a primary space for youth where passionate discussions shape their views on political topics. TikTok has succeeded in engaging young people by providing an attractive and culturally relevant space for sharing opinions (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023). It enables self-expression on political issues in creative ways, such as addressing racism through interpretative dance or using audio memes to critique biased media reports (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023).

This platform's playful nature not only entertains but also serves as a vibrant arena for political activism. Furthermore, TikTok contributes to social movements by connecting users with like-minded audiences, fostering collective political expression (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023). Additionally, changes to TikTok, such as allowing longer video formats and the promotion of live streams, have prompted journalists and news organizations to embrace the platform as a means of reaching younger audiences (Newman, 2022). However, research indicates that the majority of news content on TikTok is generated by regular content creators rather than professional journalists. This raises concerns regarding the reliability of information and warns against the potential spread of disinformation and misinformation (Newman, 2022). As research show, there is a global decrease in trust in news the credibility and reliability of news sources and the information they provide (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Research indicates a desire among news outlets to increase their presence and activity on TikTok. However, numerous challenges and concerns are causing them to proceed cautiously (Chobanyan & Nikolskaya, 2021).

Journalists and news organizations face numerous challenges when producing and distributing news content on TikTok. One of these challenges is censorship (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Reports have indicated that TikTok has concealed comments containing specific keywords and may remove content without providing explanations (Newman, 2022). Additionally, TikTok has been known to add black warning screens to posts that potentially feature violent imagery, thereby reducing their visibility. Consequently, these censorship practices restrict news content creators from effectively covering important events such as political demonstrations and conflicts (Newman, 2022). Another significant challenge faced by journalists on TikTok is monetization. Despite its popularity, TikTok remains an inadequate source of income for news content creators compared to platforms like YouTube (Newman, 2022). This is due to various factors, including the challenges associated with implementing revenue-generating tools such as product placements and sponsored posts within news content (Newman, 2022). Nevertheless, journalists are driven to engage with TikTok for several reasons. Some seek to cultivate their personal brand and expand their visibility, while others find joy in creating and sharing their ideas. Additionally, many are motivated by their passion for specific causes or issues (Newman, 2022).

Publishers seek recognition of their expertise and sensitivity in covering critical stories to avoid suppression by these algorithms so that important news do not get removed by these algorithms (Newman, 2022). As Grandinetti and Bruinsma indicate, TikTok is associated with many accusations such as content suppression, political term censorship, and deceptive data security practices (2023). In the context of fake news dissemination, algorithms are often blamed as well (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). TikTok has raised numerous concerns among both researchers and publishers. Firstly, there are worries regarding the Chinese ownership of TikTok and the potential censorship it may enforce (Grandinetti & Bruinsma, 2023). Secondly, the adaptation to TikTok's logic by creating short news videos could potentially trivialize news stories (Newman, 2022). Lastly, there are concerns about the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation facilitated by the platform's algorithms, coupled with TikTok's lack of cooperation with news publishers (Newman, 2022).

According to Newman (2022), there is no single strategy for success on TikTok. However, it is widely recognized that content must be short, easily accessible, and captivating within a few seconds. Some news outlets choose to hire young creators who are well-versed in the platform's language and culture. While this approach has proven successful, it may pose challenges when attempting to repurpose content for other social media platforms.

Alternatively, some newsrooms opt to showcase the talents of their entire team, including experienced correspondents and anchors (Newman, 2022). While this approach has also seen success, it may lack the same personal touch (Newman, 2022). Others adapt their traditional format to fit the platform's logic. For instance, on NBC News, a young female TikTok anchor diverges from traditional TV standards in her presentation style (Chobanyan & Nikolskaya, 2021). Her appearance, humor, and 'down to Earth' demeanor resonate with the platform's younger audience. Additionally, her fast reading speed suits the TikTok format, allowing her to convey more information within the platform's time constraints. She frequently appears on camera against a green screen or from the comfort of her home (Chobanyan & Nikolskaya, 2021). However, it is still not known whether these changes in presenting style that news organizations make when adapting to TikTok are beneficial or not.

2.3 Folk theory

As news outlets lost control over news distribution with the emergence of social media platforms, they realized the importance of understanding the algorithms that govern these platforms. This understanding allows them to tailor their content to align with these algorithms (Peterson-Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020). Social media platforms have increasingly become essential channels for news organizations to disseminate content to their audiences, reflecting a shift in how journalism is perceived and practiced (Hase et al., 2023). Journalism is known for its role that extends beyond simply delivering news and information to fostering public discussion and fostering a feeling of interconnectedness among individuals (Alaqabawy et al., 2023). However, the advent of social media poses a challenge to this ideal by tailoring news feeds to individual users and sidelining journalism professionals from their traditional role as gatekeepers (Alaqabawy et al., 2023).

Recent studies have reevaluated traditional gatekeeping practices in the digital age, where readers now have direct influence over news dissemination through online platforms (Peterson-Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020). The increased use of social media for news consumption allows users to amplify stories online and provides analytical tools that could be fed back into professional gatekeeping decisions and determinations of newsworthiness (Peterson-Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020).

As news organizations strive to optimize content for social media platforms to maintain economic viability, they face challenges in understanding the opaque algorithms governing these platforms (Peterson-Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020). Consequently, journalists seek to navigate and understand these algorithms and incorporate keys of social

media success into their editorial decisions which in turn influence the news they produce (Peterson-Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020).

Folk theories arise from a process of inductive-deductive reasoning aimed at elucidating social phenomena (Dogruel, 2021). Researchers employ folk theory to examine how individuals interpret their own and others' actions. According to this theory, people form perceptions about their environments to help them make sense of, predict, and exert control over their environments (Dogruel, 2021). Similarly, individuals develop perceptions or theories about technological systems, often based on their repeated experiences and observations with these systems (Dogruel, 2021). Users develop folk theories to give a meaning to their own experiences with a technology or system (Karizat et al., 2021). While these theories remain predictions and may not always be accurate, they influence individuals' behaviors and expectations regarding these systems (Dogruel, 2021).

Folk theories are applied across various digital contexts to comprehend user behaviors and their perceptions of their interactions with online platforms (Karizat et al., 2021). One of the greatest challenges users face to understand and interpret the way social media platforms perform is understanding the functioning of their algorithms. This is largely due to the opacity that surrounds these algorithms (Grandinetti & Bruinsma, 2023).

There are three reasons behind the opacity of algorithms as Dogruel (2021) indicates. Firstly, corporations and governments frequently enforce secrecy on algorithms to protect competitive advantages or prevent potential manipulations, such as 'gaming the system' tactics. Secondly, even if the code is openly available, it remains challenging for non-experts to comprehend. Thirdly, algorithms have complex structures that consist of a dynamic interplay between multiple algorithms serving distinct functions and objectives. Even for professionals, comprehensively understanding algorithmic systems is nearly impossible, especially given that algorithms are intertwined with the data they analyze, meaning they "operate in context (Dogruel, 2021). Therefore, users strive to grasp social media algorithms by developing algorithmic folk theories. Algorithmic folk theories are defined as intuitive, informal theories that individuals construct to comprehend the effects, consequences or processes behind the outcomes of the technologies they use (Karizat et al., 2021). Based on this comprehension, individuals adjust their reactions and behavior towards these systems (Karizat et al., 2021).

Although users lack complete understanding of algorithmic functionality, they observe how algorithms operate and experiment with them during their interactions, modifying their behavior when feasible (Dogruel, 2021). However, this strategic appropriation of behavior is crucial when the users are journalists producing news. Therefore, this thesis explores the relationship between news workers algorithmic folk theories about TikTok and their editorial decision making process when making news on this platform.

3. Method

To investigate journalists' understanding of the TikTok algorithm and its influence on their editorial strategies, ten semi-structured interviews (N=10) were conducted. The semi-structured interview format was chosen because, as Baftiu and Dodds (2023) indicate, it allows the interviewer to guide the conversation while also providing interviewees with the opportunity to raise important issues that may not have been expected.

Participants had to fulfill specific criteria for sample selection. They needed to be currently involved in creating news content for TikTok, either directly through editing and executing or by consulting and supervising, or they were required to have previous work experience in making news content for TikTok.

The interviews included journalists from two prominent news organizations in the Netherlands, NOS and RTL. These organizations were selected due to their significant presence and activity on TikTok. Notably, RTL has a dedicated newsroom for TikTok content, RTL Nieuws, which operates separately and publishes distinct news stories that differ in both topics and presentation format from RTL's content on other social media platforms. The RTL Nieuws TikTok account was officially launched in November 2023, whereas NOS has been on TikTok for several years. In contrast to RTL Nieuws, NOS newsrooms such as NOS Stories, NOS op 3, and NOS Sport produce content for various social media platforms, including TikTok. While some newsrooms, such as NOS Stories, are highly active on TikTok, posting between five and six news stories daily, NOS social media newsrooms occasionally share the same news stories on both Instagram and TikTok.

The interviews recruited six journalists from different social media teams at RTL, including RTL Nieuws on TikTok, and four journalists from various social media teams active on TikTok at NOS. Interviewees were selected based on their involvement in editorial decision-making for TikTok news content. All interviewees from NOS are currently involved in creating news content for TikTok. At RTL, I conducted interviews with journalists who are

directly involved in producing TikTok news content and those who participate indirectly by consulting and engaging with the TikTok newsroom team. All but one had previous work experience creating news stories for TikTok. The interviews took place either at the headquarters or online. Participants' roles varied, including editors-in-chief, journalists responsible for the entire TikTok content creation process (editing and writing scripts), social editors, and social media strategy advisors.

The guiding questions were prepared before the interviews, which were then recorded and transcribed. Recordings were anonymized and kept confidential. During the interviews, participants were asked about their gatekeeping and editorial practices. For instance, participants were asked questions such as: How do they determine the suitability of content for TikTok? How do they decide whether to include sound effects or music in specific stories? How do they predict the potential success of a video? What details would they leave out when making a news story for TikTok? These interviews aimed to explore journalists' intuitions about the functionality of TikTok algorithms, delve into their perceptions of these algorithms and examine their conceptions of what constitutes successful content on the platform. Additionally, the interviews sought to understand the personal experiences and observations that shaped journalists' perceptions.

After transcribing the interviews, an open coding was conducted. Open coding is a qualitative data analysis technique used to analyze textual data. It involves examining and breaking down the data into smaller parts, labeling them with codes, and identifying categories to build concepts and define main themes from the data (Khandkar, 2009). Open coding was chosen because it allows for examining the data without preconceived sets of codes. This approach allows notions to emerge directly from the raw data (Khandkar, 2009), which aligns with the research question aimed at exploring the theories journalists form about TikTok. I reviewed the transcriptions to code the data and derive results from the interviews, searching for similarities, differences, and critical concepts. I defined the main categories from the texts and created a coding scheme accordingly (Appendix). Based on the main categories, I made three themes presented in the findings section, where participants were referred to anonymously as P1 to P10 to safeguard the privacy of journalists and editors.

4. Findings

After analyzing the data, three themes were identified in the discourse.

4.1 Folk theories

Participants developed various folk theories about TikTok and its algorithm.

Participants identified engagement as a critical metric for success on TikTok, and emphasized the necessity of capturing viewers' attention almost instantly. Most of the interviewees stated that it is essential to grab the attention of your viewer in the first few seconds, between two or three seconds. In the eyes of the participants, a successful news story that would get a lot of views on TikTok is, as they described, snappy, compact, more to the point, captivating from the first few seconds, relevant for the youth, trendy, and debatable. Many participants stated that interaction is an essential factor that makes the video get higher reach and get pushed by the algorithm. They explained that as much as the topic and approach of the news story trigger users to like and comment on the video, the algorithm recognizes the video as interesting to watch and pushes it to more and more users.

Interviewees mentioned various factors they identified as helpful trigger points for the TikTok algorithm. Some journalists emphasized the importance of watch time averages, stating that it is essential to create videos that viewers will want to watch until the end. P3 indicated that broader engagement, including sending, saving, and reposting a video, encourages the algorithm to push it more (Interview, April 31, 2024).

To adapt to the logic of TikTok, journalists employ various strategies to ensure their content is favored by the algorithm. Some participants mentioned that the algorithm prefers when viewers watch a video repeatedly. Therefore, they often remove the outro included in the Instagram version of the video before posting it on TikTok, ensuring the viewer remains engaged and does not immediately realize the video has ended. Another effective tactic, according to one participant, is using a popular sound effect or music on TikTok but lowering the volume to the minimum. To create a captivating video that grabs the viewer's attention, some journalists emphasized the importance of starting with a strong punchline and making a promise about what the video will reveal, before proceeding to tell the story. In this sense, journalists indicated that videos should be cohesive, delivering one message rather than addressing the topic from multiple angles.

Many interviewees indicated that the audience of TikTok is mostly less patient and expects to be entertained on this platform rather than informed. According to numerous participants, TikTok users do not anticipate watching long videos that are overloaded with information or feature experts explaining complex topics. Regarding video length, the

majority of participants recommended short videos that do not exceed one minute. They attributed this perception to the fact that their TikTok audience is relatively younger compared to their audience on other platforms, which may make them less patient and more inclined towards entertainment. Additionally, a significant proportion of views come from users who do not follow their news page, which means that these viewers might not be interested in news content in the first place. Therefore, videos on TikTok should be short and engaging within the first two or three seconds. In this regard, some participants mentioned what they referred to as the 'three seconds rule,' suggesting that viewers take three seconds to decide whether to watch the video or not, while other participants indicated that this period is two seconds.

When the participants were asked about what they identified as irrelevant for TikTok and its audience, many answers were similar. Some interviewees indicated that they avoid including 'talking heads,' such as experts and older individuals explaining a topic, as they believe this format would be boring for the TikTok audience. If tasked with adapting a news story for TikTok, some participants stated they would replace experts with a single presenter narrating the story. Other participants suggested they would exclude quotes of what one of them referred to as "boring white old men."

In terms of the topics of news stories, some participants described relevant news content on TikTok as stories that their young audience can relate to and that affect their lives in some way. They gave examples such as personal experiences of their peers, long study fines, or news about popular trends among the youth. However, other participants argued that no news topics should be considered irrelevant for TikTok or its audience if approached and presented in the right way. For instance, almost all participants indicated that when addressing a heavy or significant topic, such as the war in Gaza, it is essential to focus on one specific angle because the story is too vast to be covered in a one-minute video. As P10 stated, 'It is always a video with one specific angle on a bigger news situation' (Interview, June 03, 2024).

The relevance of a news story's topic for TikTok's audience does not guarantee its visibility through TikTok's algorithm. Many interviewees mentioned a phenomenon known as 'shadow banning,' where TikTok restricts and potentially hides or removes content related to certain topics, even if they are trendy, popular, or of public interest. Journalists speculated that this practice could explain why some videos on important and sensitive topics receive unexpectedly low views. Examples of topics mentioned by participants as frequently being subject to shadow banning include the situation in Gaza and news related to TikTok's privacy

issues, its data usage, and algorithmic operations. Furthermore, TikTok automatically hides comments and videos containing specific words such as 'sex,' 'kill,' and 'suicide,' regardless of their context or message. To circumvent this, journalists often avoid using these words in video captions or alter them slightly to evade detection by the algorithm.

Most of the participants agreed that hashtags can be helpful in increasing the visibility of content. Some participants were uncertain about their effectiveness, mentioning that they were instructed to include hashtags as part of policy without fully understanding the rationale. Others believed that users are likely to click on relevant hashtags, especially for trending topics, thereby increasing the reach of the news story. Several interviewees emphasized the importance of using only pertinent hashtags, with one cautioning that excessive use could potentially hinder the algorithm's distribution of the video. Another participant suggested that using hashtags and location tags allows the algorithm to distribute the video to a wider audience. P1 elaborated:

“Let's say we have to publish a video about Ajax football team and we located in Amsterdam and used the hashtag #ajax #amsterdam #football #goal then TikTok I think knows and is going to serve it to Amsterdam lovers, football lovers and Ajax lovers football we're going so this way we are giving TikTok a lot of more reasons to serve it to other channels and algorithms.”(Interview, April 30, 2024).

Many participants noted that using hashtags, along with in-app editing, contributes to higher reach for videos because TikTok favors content that utilizes its features. This includes incorporating elements such as filters, sound effects, music, and other tools provided by TikTok. However, many participants mentioned that as a professional news organization, they do not use these in-app effects because they rely on their own editing software. One of the participants, P8, added that search engine optimization (SEO) should be taken into account when choosing relevant hashtags (Interview, May 31, 2024). This involves improving the visibility of content in search engine results, thereby attracting more organic traffic (Berman & Katona, 2013). Accordingly, the journalist advises that editors should look online for relevant and popular words and hashtags to use in their captions, as he states, it helps the algorithm push their content, increases visibility, and ensures the content reaches the right audience.

4.2 Reducing uncertainty

Participants expressed difficulty in understanding TikTok's algorithm due to its opaque nature. However, some participants showed outdated information about the metrics available on this platform. P1 described TikTok's metrics as mysterious, noting that TikTok provides less detailed metrics compared to platforms like Instagram and YouTube (Interview, April 30, 2024). According to this participant, TikTok does not display the average watch time of videos, nor does it clearly indicate the geographic origins of viewers. In contrast, he prefers YouTube's metrics because they allow minute-by-minute analysis of viewer retention and engagement patterns. Nonetheless, anyone who checks the metrics of their posted TikTok videos would find that this information is indeed available.

As participants struggle to comprehend the opaque algorithm behind TikTok, they resort to various sources and tactics to reduce their uncertainty. Some stay updated by checking expert blogs, newsletters, and websites that provide valuable insights into the best strategies to increase reach on TikTok. Additionally, participants maintain strong connections with TikTok representatives, meeting with them and attending presentations on new updates, privacy issues, and best practices. However, many participants do not fully believe TikTok, which often leaves more room for confusion. As P9 indicated, “Sometimes you have all the successful factors for a video to spread, but it does not, and you cannot know why. Then you have only one explanation: the algorithm dislikes its topic, but TikTok won’t admit it.” (Interview, May 31, 2024).

Another strategy mentioned by some participants involves communicating with their target audience at schools. Participants also have regular meetings, either daily or weekly, with the entire newsroom team to consult and pitch new topics and ideas. Moreover, some newsrooms have expert journalists in social media strategies who guide their colleagues. Some participants often follow this advice without questioning the rationale behind it. Additionally, some journalists analyze metrics from previous videos to draw conclusions about their success or failure. One interviewee, responsible for social media strategies at a NOS newsroom, stated that he conducts a monthly analysis to inventory the videos and adjust strategies accordingly.

4.3 Journalistic values versus algorithmic needs

Journalists indicated that even if they were aware of tricks and strategies that guarantee a high reach for their content, as a news organization, they should still adhere to their ethical guardrails and follow what their journalistic values dictate. For instance, P2 from

NOS Sport stated that they noticed that their funny videos using memes often achieve high reach and go viral (Interview, April 30, 2024). However, as a news organization, it is their responsibility to inform people about important incidents rather than entertaining them or 'coloring the news,' as P1 put it (Interview, April 30, 2024).

Many participants indicated that despite knowing that some topics are not favored by the TikTok algorithm, they still want to produce news stories about them because they are relevant and important for people to know, such as news about conflicts. They indicated that it is challenging to narrate a significant news story such as the situation in Gaza in one minute, especially with the risk of it being shadow banned. However, they also emphasized the importance of informing young people about such incidents and helping them understand what is happening

In terms of editing practices and incorporating music or other elements, many participants stated that they primarily make editorial decisions based on the story's perspective and what complements it. They believe that utilizing popular sounds and hashtags can prompt the algorithm to promote their videos more effectively, but as P6 pointed out, "there's a thin line between getting a viral video and being a serious news organization. And we always try to balance that" (Interview, May 20, 2024). Therefore, they include popular and trendy elements if they align with their news story. Other participants, who had less understanding of how TikTok's algorithm functions, did not consider including elements that are popular on TikTok when editing stories and stated that they focus solely on editing stories based on the requirements of the topic to ensure high quality of the news story.

5. Discussion

As mentioned in the literature review, people develop folk theories about technologies through experimentation and based on their previous experiences with them. However, some participants did not aim to draw conclusions from previous content, and many of them did not experiment with certain features such as hashtags. Many participants indicated that they do not review the metrics of previous videos due to busy workdays creating content for multiple social media platforms. Additionally, some interviewees underestimated the importance of researching these metrics for future strategies. They mentioned that when making assumptions about why certain videos received low views, potential factors could include the caption, hashtags, topic, shadow banning, or editing. Since they never repost the same video, they cannot definitively determine the cause. Furthermore, several participants admitted they

did not understand the rationale behind certain practices, such as including hashtags. They indicated that they always use hashtags because it is recommended, referring to it as policy. As they have never posted a video without hashtags they do not know if hashtags really make a difference. Moreover, As mentioned in the findings, many newsrooms post the same content on TikTok as they do on Instagram without adapting it to TikTok's unique logic. One participant clarified that this is due to staff shortages and lack of time. Therefore, it could be noticed that participants, to some extent, did not experiment or fully leverage their previous experiences when developing folk theories about TikTok's algorithm.

Participants made assumptions and developed folk theories regarding video views based on their feelings rather than concrete, verified information. One of the most contradictory points among participants was their varied opinions on how long a user must watch a video to count as a view. Answers ranged from two seconds to three, ten seconds, and some respondents simply stated 'not long.' None of them were certain about the exact duration and were mostly guessing. However, this information is readily available and explicitly stated: at least one second for a one-minute video and at least three seconds for videos lasting three minutes or longer (Howell, 2024). Participant 9 acknowledged that this information is not confidential but admitted personal uncertainty about it.

Personal intuition and preferences of participants played a significant role in developing their theories about captivating content on TikTok. As previously noted, all participants emphasized the critical importance of the first two or three seconds of a video. However, most could not definitively cite the source of this belief. A few mentioned having read it somewhere, while others justified it based on personal feeling, asserting that if they were viewers themselves, they would expect to be grabbed within this duration. This criterion also guided their evaluations of older videos. Some participants indicated that when they encountered news stories with limited reach, they often evaluated them based on their personal preferences as viewers.

As Newman argued, there is no singular formula for success on TikTok. However, it is widely acknowledged that content must be concise, immediately engaging, and easily digestible within seconds (2022). Similarly, participants identified several factors crucial for successful TikTok content, including being snappy, compact, captivating from the outset, trendy, and debatable.

As suggested in the literature review, news workers' understanding of TikTok's algorithm and pathways to success on the platform prompted the adoption of specific editing practices (Karizat et al., 2021). Similarly, participants adjusted their editorial strategies according to their perception of successful content on TikTok, such as removing outros, creating shorter videos, and incorporating trendy hashtags. Nevertheless, participants' efforts to tailor their news content to TikTok's platform, influenced by their perception of its requirements, posed challenges to their journalistic principles.

Most of the folk theories developed by participants regarding successful content on TikTok challenged their journalistic standards, suggesting a tendency towards trivializing news content through adopting superficial approach. As mentioned in the findings section, most participants recommended producing short news stories that do not exceed one minute. They acknowledged the difficulty of addressing complex topics within such a brief timeframe. A few participants indicated that they create explainer videos for those interested in more detailed information, or they refer viewers to their websites in the comments for further explanations. The challenge of narrating a news story in one minute often results in the omission of detailed information, such as expert insights and perspectives from various parties, which can lead to a superficial treatment of news stories.

The risk of shadow banning by TikTok, coupled with the one-minute time constraint, compels participants to select narrow angles and secondary incidents to narrate larger news stories. For instance, telling the story of a certain Palestinian child in the Gaza war instead of reporting the broader scene. This approach can result in an incomplete and superficial portrayal of events, lacking a comprehensive explanation of the broader context and historical background. Additionally, participants emphasized the necessity of capturing the viewer's attention within the first few seconds, given that their target audience is young and expects to be entertained rather than informed. This emphasis on producing snappy and attractive news stories often prioritizes style over substance, potentially compromising the quality of the information provided. This could relate to the concerns Bruns and Nuernbergk (2019) referred to as 'lingering unease' regarding the conflict between the logics of social media platforms and the professional norms of journalism when attempting to adapt to the logic of social media. It also aligns with what Newman (2022) indicated in the literature review, suggesting that adapting to TikTok's logic could potentially trivialize news stories.

Many participants cited TikTok itself as a source of information for understanding its algorithm and developing effective strategies, mentioning attending workshops or contacting

TikTok representatives. However, these participants expressed skepticism about fully trusting everything TikTok tells them, which often leaves more room for developing theories.

In this confusing and ambiguous situation caused by the opaque nature of TikTok on journalists, many participants chose to adhere to their traditional journalistic guardrails rather than delve into the algorithm. This is evident when participants do not consider whether including certain elements could increase views when editing news stories. Most of them stated that they edit based on the topic of the news story itself, regardless of the algorithm. Besides editing practices, choosing topics for news stories remains challenging for the participants. They indicated that they still choose topics they believe have journalistic value, even if the algorithm would not prefer them.

6. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to examine how news workers develop strategies and shape editorial practices informed by their folk theories about TikTok's opaque algorithm. Through ten semi-structured interviews with journalists from two prominent Dutch news organizations, NOS and RTL, this study sheds light on how journalists' folk theories about TikTok's algorithm influence the news content they produce.

To conclude, participants developed diverse folk theories regarding effective strategies for TikTok. They identified the recipe for successful content on TikTok as being snappy, compact, captivating from the first few seconds, relevant to youth, trendy, no longer than one minute, and debatable. Participants highlighted high watch time averages, the use of trendy hashtags, and tagging locations as crucial factors for optimizing algorithmic visibility. To align with TikTok's preferences, some participants employed strategies such as removing outros to sustain viewer engagement. Most participants perceived TikTok's audience as younger and less inclined toward informative content, which influenced their approach to creating news stories. Consequently, participants tended to prioritize creating short and concise stories, omitting expert insights, and focusing on delivering a single compelling message. Some participants argued that no news topic is irrelevant if approached and presented correctly. In this regard, almost all participants suggested approaching significant and war-related news stories from specific angles to fit the one-minute timeframe and avoid the risk of shadow banning. These observations highlight participants' tendency to prioritize snappy content, potentially at the expense of depth, and style over substance, which could trivialize news. When confronted with uncertainties about the effectiveness of some editorial

practices, such as including music and other elements in news stories to increase views on TikTok, some participants opted to adhere to traditional journalistic principles, editing stories solely based on the needs of their news topics.

The findings of this study align with the literature in many respects. However, it has some limitations. One limitation is that TikTok may not be a priority in the business model for NOS, as it is already funded by the government and thus may not have a pressing need to utilize TikTok extensively. This was reflected in the fact that some interviewees were from newsrooms that posted only one TikTok video daily. Additionally, many interviewees from RTL were part of RTL Nieuws, which is relatively new to TikTok since November 2023, resulting in limited experience in creating news content specifically tailored for TikTok. Furthermore, due to staff shortages, several newsrooms in NOS occasionally posted the same content on TikTok as they did on Instagram without adapting it for the platform. Consequently, when asked about changes they would make to their Instagram news stories to align with TikTok's logic, some interviewees responded hypothetically. Another limitation is the small sample size of interviews, totaling only 10 participants, which may restrict the representativeness of the findings.

For further research, I suggest examining how journalists' strategies and folk theories about TikTok evolve over time as they gain more experience with the platform. Additionally, investigating the audience's perception of news content on TikTok and its impact on their understanding and engagement with news could offer valuable perspectives on the effectiveness and consequences of these strategies.

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Appendix

Code	Coded when	Examples
Success factors on TikTok	Participants mention factors that make news stories get a lot of views on TikTok or characteristic of successful content on TikTok	<p>P3: “We think the longer you watch and also we think if somebody likes it or comments or shares more people will see it. Or repost it. Then your followers are going to get it on there for you page. So yeah, how we think like interaction with the video gets more views”.</p> <p>P4: “It has to be snappy with graphics or something, a lot of color”.</p>
Mystery	Participants express uncertainty or lack of knowledge about the role of some strategies, editorial practices, or the use of certain features on TikTok in optimizing the visibility of news content on this platform.	<p>P5: “I don’t know if tagging location helps to push, to make the algorithm spread the content more”</p> <p>P1: “I don't think we really have proof for it like really hard proof I think in the end it's just kind of a gut feeling for a lot of people”.</p>
Source of their information	Participants mention the way or source they build their algorithmic folk theories about certain strategies, editorial practices, or characteristics of their target audience on TikTok, for instance, through learning from experimenting,	<p>P8: “I try to pay attention to what my colleague says, but I do also get my information from Reels as well. I follow like a couple of pages that like give tips on how to get viral videos and how to do that stuff”.</p>

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	previous experiences, or from experts.	
Target audience	Participants identify the characteristic of their target audience on TikTok and their preferences.	P1: "They want to see a nice goal they want to see a nice finish in cycling but they're not waiting for a coach telling why he made his tactical decision".
Platform nature	Participants identify their perception of TikTok and its algorithm, and how it differs from other social media platforms in terms of algorithm and audience.	P10: "The big difference is that you don't have to have a big followers account on TikTok to reach a million people".
Ethics of journalism	Participants mention adhering to their journalistic principles or when they address the challenging situation between algorithmic needs and journalistic values.	P2: "For us as a news organization the most important thing is that we have to be presenting the news to the people, we have tell people what's happening".

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