

TikTok and Traditional Transnational Media in the Russia-Ukraine War

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Abstract: This article analyzes the relationship between TikTok and traditional news media such as CNN and the BBC in their coverage of the Ukraine war. Drawing on published academic research on disinformation, audience effects, digital diplomacy, and refugee narratives, the article argues that TikTok has not replaced traditional media, but rather the two complement each other. TikTok disseminates news faster, its content resonates more emotionally with the public, and it reaches a younger audience. While traditional media disseminates information more slowly, it provides more in-depth analysis, facts, and background information, with guaranteed source authenticity. Therefore, the two are not mutually exclusive but complementary. News organizations should make reasonable use of both media formats.

Keywords: TikTok, Traditional news media, Relationship, Complementary, Ukraine war.

1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose of the study

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, TikTok has become a major source of content related to the war. Videos tagged with #Ukraine accumulated 36.9 billion views in the three months following the outbreak of hostilities [3]. Meanwhile, traditional international media outlets such as CNN, BBC, The New York Times, and Le Monde have continued to deliver verified, professional studying. This parallel phenomenon raises a central question: what is the relationship between TikTok and traditional global media? This study aims to clarify that relationship by systematically analyzing how these two types of media operated during the Russia-Ukraine war.

1.2. Issues to be discussed and their significance

More and more young people are no longer getting their news from traditional media such as television or newspapers, but rather from social media platforms like TikTok [4]. If TikTok only provides false or misleading information, the credibility of its studying will be questioned. However, if TikTok can supplement useful content neglected by traditional media, the two can cooperate effectively.

This article analyzes four types of relationships. The first is competition: TikTok attracts a large number of users, leading to a shrinking audience for traditional media, rendering it irrelevant. The second is substitution: TikTok fully assumes the responsibility of war studying, causing traditional media to disappear completely. The third is cooperative coexistence: both parties cooperate as equal partners. The fourth is complementary coexistence: both parties leverage their unique strengths to support each other, rather than monopolizing each other.

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1.3. Research methods

This paper employs a case study approach, focusing on the Russo-Ukrainian War from 2022 to 2025. The evidence drawn from published academic research includes studies focusing on misinformation and propaganda on TikTok [3]. Other studies have experimentally examined how TikTok videos influence American youth's views on war [4]. A third study analyzes how Ukraine and Israel utilize TikTok for digital diplomacy [9]. A fourth study tracks a Ukrainian refugee who gained popularity on TikTok [8]. By analyzing and summarizing these findings, the paper compares the two media platforms across four dimensions: the speed of news dissemination, the depth of news studying, the platform's fact-checking capabilities, and the characteristics of its actual audience.

1.4. Limitations

This study still has limitations. The war continues, and people's use of TikTok is rapidly evolving. The study did not interview any journalists or TikTok creators, relying instead on published research to understand the situation. These studies themselves have limitations, such as small sample sizes or the constant updates to TikTok's algorithms [3, 4].

2. Research theory

2.1. Definition of traditional transnational media

Let us start with the old-style media. Traditional transnational media refers to news organizations that operate

across national borders, employing professional editors, fact-checkers, and adhering to established journalistic standards. Ang [1] describes this system as "accelerated transnationalism and globalization." Essentially, major media outlets such as CNN and BBC dominate most cross-border news flows. These media organizations are either privately owned or operated by public institutions, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

Christin [5] uses Bourdieu's idea of a "field" to describe what makes a real transnational media space. She says three things are needed. First, people have to fight over what counts as "good journalism". Second, journalists in different countries have to influence each other. Third, they have to share real stakes the same audiences, the same awards, the same jobs. By that measure, even the exchange of news between the US and France is only a "weak transnational field", because the French follow American media much more than Americans follow French media [5]. For 24-hour channels like CNN, the transnational character is stronger, but language and advertising markets still get in the way.

Drawing on the research of Christin [5], Ang [1], and Gehl [7], we can identify five characteristics of traditional transnational media. First, news is produced by salaried professionals under the guidance of supervisors and editors. Second, all content must undergo review before publication. Third, regarding factual accuracy, corrections are publicly issued when errors occur. Fourth, there are fixed content formats, such as news briefs, documentaries, and in-depth studies. Fifth, editorial decisions determine what audiences see, rather than algorithms. Although streaming platforms have begun to employ algorithms [6], traditional media still prioritize editorial judgment.

2.2. Definition of TikTok

Now for TikTok. It launched worldwide in 2018, owned by the Chinese company ByteDance [6]. Unlike CNN or the BBC, TikTok does not make its own news. Instead, anyone can upload a video, and an algorithm decides what to show each user on their "For You Page".

According to several researchers [3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9], six factors make TikTok particularly distinctive in war studying. First, algorithmic content delivery operates without a fixed schedule, continuously pushing videos based on users' previous viewing history [6]. Second, anyone with a smartphone can become a battlefield journalist [8]. Third, audio clips from others can be easily reused with just one tap, enabling rapid spread of misinformation [3]. Fourth, even extremely serious content is often presented humorously, satirically, or through intense emotional expression [8]. Fifth, although TikTok has community guidelines, its content moderation is insufficiently rigorous, allowing false videos and manipulated footage to pass review undetected [3]. Sixth, users can employ pseudonyms or remove original audio tracks, making it difficult to trace the origins of rumors [3].

TikTok is a commercial platform that generates revenue through advertising and monitoring user behavior [7]. At the same time, it functions as an "alternative media" platform, enabling a form of "participatory war journalism" unmatched by traditional media—content that is raw, immediate, and highly appealing to young audiences [8].

3. Case study analysis

3.1. How traditional media covered the Ukraine war

Traditional media relies on on-the-ground study, satellite imagery, expert interviews, and fact-checking to study news. Bojor and Cirdei [2] examined Russian propaganda content between 2014 and 2022, finding that a large volume of disinformation spread widely on social media was ultimately exposed by traditional media. For instance, false stories such as "a child crucified in Sloviansk" and "Ukrainian extremists killing a pregnant woman" were debunked by traditional journalists [2]. The authors noted that social media succeeded in spreading misinformation partly due to its rapid dissemination and high level of anonymity, but traditional media's fact-checking efforts eventually played a corrective role [2].

Ozoran et al. [9] studied official TikTok accounts from Ukraine and Israel. They found that the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs primarily used TikTok to tell identity-based narratives—highlighting courage, culture, and determination not to surrender. In contrast, traditional media focused more on systemic narratives such as geopolitics, military strategies, and diplomatic negotiations [9]. Thus, rather than competing for the same mission, they are actually performing different functions.

3.2. What TikTok did during the war

Bosch and Divon [3] did the most detailed study of how sound and audio memes spread false information on TikTok. They sort the problem into three levels.

At the low level, a Ukrainian soldier named Alex Hook posted a video of himself dancing in full combat gear to Michael Jackson's "Smooth Criminal". It got 88 million views in 24 hours [3]. It was fun and raised morale, but it also made the war look less dangerous than it really was.

At the mid level, the phrase "Russian warship, go fuck yourself" became an audio meme that was used in 80 billion views [3]. The story that all 13 Ukrainian border guards had died turned out to be false, they were actually taken prisoner, but by the time that correction came out, the meme had already done its job of boosting Ukrainian spirits and winning sympathy around the world.

At the high level, pro-Russian campaigns hijacked a dance challenge called "Masquerade" to spread the "Z" symbol. They also paid Russian influencers to read out the same pro-Kremlin script, turning them into what Bosch and Divon [3] call "audiovisual human bots".

Gordon and Tirosh [8] tell the story of Valeria Shashenok, a young Ukrainian photographer who became a refugee. She gained 1.3 million followers on TikTok by posting short, funny, and sometimes sarcastic videos about life in a bomb shelter and then as a refugee in Italy and the UK [8]. The researchers call her style "political playfulness". Unlike traditional news, which often shows refugees as helpless victims, Valeria came across as strong, clever, and in control of her own story. This is something TikTok does really well, giving a voice to ordinary people in a way that traditional media often miss.

But can TikTok actually teach people anything? Bystrytska [4] ran an experiment with 794 young Americans. She showed one group satirical TikTok videos about the war and another group explanatory videos. Then she tested what they had learned. The result? Both groups learned only a tiny bit,

the video type explained just 2% of the differences in their knowledge. Worse, both groups became more cynical about politics. Their sense of whether they could make a difference and their empathy did not really change, except that Republicans felt a bit more empathy after watching the explanatory videos [4]. So TikTok grabs attention and stirs emotions, but it is not great at building real understanding.

3.3. Four possible relationships

Let's compare these two media formats side-by-side. On the one hand, traditional media operates at a slow pace in delivering news because rigorous fact-checking takes time. However, official platforms of traditional media do offer depth, systematically verifying information before official release, maintaining a relatively neutral tone, and often catering to older, more policy-conscious audiences. On the other hand, TikTok spreads news extremely quickly, frequently pushing raw, live video from the scene. But frankly, its content is rather superficial, hardly qualifying as formal news studying, and its fact-checking process is very weak, its tone too casual or emotional, and its audience is predominantly young global users [3, 4]. Traditional media constructs a systemic narrative, while TikTok relies on identity and personal storytelling [8, 9].

The first relationship is one of challenge. Will TikTok really steal so much attention that traditional news becomes irrelevant? Indeed, young people heavily use TikTok for news [4]. But the same study also points to a significant problem: the knowledge they gain on TikTok is extremely limited, and the content lacks depth. When these young users truly want to understand historical context or the full picture, they still turn to traditional media [4]. Furthermore, we still urgently need traditional news to clean up misinformation online [2]. So, a race for user attention is underway, but traditional media remains a dominant force.

The second relationship is one of substitution: Will TikTok completely replace traditional media? Absolutely not. There is no empirical research to support this claim. Even the most heavy and addicted TikTok users will still choose to read or watch traditional news content when faced with major events or wanting to know the truth about the news [4]. No government would ask its diplomats to abandon official traditional media outlets and solely source and publish news content from TikTok. The theory of completely replacing traditional news was doomed to fail from the start.

The third type of relationship is collaboration. Can TikTok and traditional media truly collaborate across sectors? Indeed, we have seen some cross-sectoral phenomena. Traditional media outlets, in order to maintain their influence, have launched vertical short videos to reach a younger audience, while TikTok is also experimenting with original news programs [9]. But ultimately, their business models are drastically different. Traditional news relies on institutional trust, while TikTok leverages its massive dissemination data to generate revenue. Christin's [5] concept of "weak field" aptly describes this situation. They share symbolic interests, such as how to define which content will go viral or be high-quality studying, but their material interests are completely disconnected; they are not competing for the exact same advertising revenue or core user intent. Therefore, collaboration exists, but it also faces insurmountable structural limitations.

The fourth type of relationship is complementary coexistence. TikTok has achieved what traditional media

cannot: it provides news content with rapid dissemination, emotional impact that resonates with the public, and places the voices of ordinary people before a vast young demographic. Conversely, traditional media excels precisely at TikTok's weaknesses: in-depth content verification, contextualization, and systematic analysis. They are not substitutes, but simply different tools for different tasks. The reality is not that TikTok surpasses CNN or vice versa. On the contrary, they are organically integrated, with each platform filling the institutional gaps left by the other.

4. Conclusion

TikTok has not replaced traditional multinational media. There is no evidence or case to support this view. Even loyal TikTok users still consult traditional media when faced with major news events and need accurate information. No country or government uses trending topics on TikTok to replace traditional official press conferences. The relationship between TikTok and traditional media is more one of complementarity and coexistence. TikTok brings speed of dissemination and evokes emotional resonance among the public, allowing ordinary people's voices to be heard and attracting a large young audience. Traditional media provides in-depth and authoritative studying on major events, ensuring the credibility of its news content. They are not competing in the same field, but rather like two different tools in a toolbox, each playing its role and coexisting with each other.

Traditional media is learning from TikTok. For example, official media outlets are posting short videos and vertical formats on TikTok to express richer emotions while maintaining journalistic accuracy. Therefore, traditional media will not disappear, nor will it completely transform into a social media platform like TikTok. While disseminating news, TikTok is also continuously strengthening its verification of the authenticity of information sources, it will not disappear, nor will it completely become traditional media. They all focus on the same big issues, but their funding sources and audiences are not the same.

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