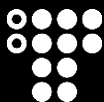


How to TikTok: first steps for media companies

Presentation | November, 2020



TheFix

What's the purpose of this document?

TikTok took the world by storm over the past couple of years. The app was downloaded over 2 billion times, setting a record in Q1 of 2020 for the most app downloads in a single quarter with total of 315 million.

"The Future is TikTok," boldly affirmed a recent article by the Harvard Political Review.

But as both individual users and companies have flocked to the app, enticed by the novel algorithm and growth opportunities, media have largely stayed away. Just a fraction have opened accounts – the BBC joined the platform in September 2020 – and fewer still know what to do once they are there.

This document aims to introduce TikTok to media considering the new platform and to provide some guidance on key questions and first steps. It is neither exhaustive nor definitive – pretending to be either on such a fast-moving topic would be hubris – and should be seen as a first draft into the matter rather than a final edit.

The elements tackled include reasons to be on TikTok, cases of media already there, a brief overview of how the platform works, approaches to content strategy, steps to launch, tips and tricks on building traffic and a list of useful initiatives and resources. Additional details on the approach and background can be found at the end.

So please enjoy the report and, for those media ready to jump into the weird and wonderful world of TikTok – good luck!



Is it time for your media to get on TikTok?

TikTok is officially the fastest growing app ever. In Q1 of 2020 the app had 315 million downloads. As of October 2020 TikTok has around 850 million monthly active users (MAU) – the most common metric for measuring app popularity.

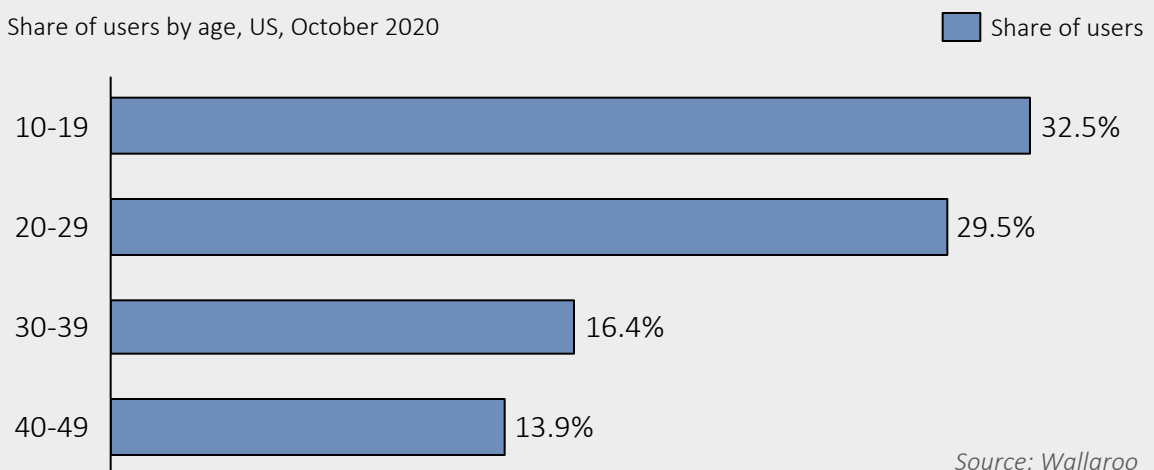
Crazy growth is great, but media need a better reason before jumping onto yet another platform whose algorithm they do not control, and which does not naturally link back to core infrastructure (e.g., its site or app).

There are three broad reasons a media should be thinking about TikTok:

- **Building a brand relationship** with a new generation of digital citizens in their teens and 20s (but not only – see graph below), bring them into their funnel and aiming to convert them into regular supporters. These audiences, which rarely buy newspapers or watch TV, could otherwise be hard to reach for legacy media in particular
- Using TikTok as a **platform for content distribution**. The platform’s algorithm can cause videos to blow up, although it does prioritize lighter, not political content¹ – which means you need a lot of creativity and to adapt to the “language of TikTok”
- Turning TikTok into **a new revenue stream** is risky, as the market is still in its infancy and likely to be changed by company policy changes. But just like with every other social media – monetization options will appear, and a head start always helps

More than just teens and tweens

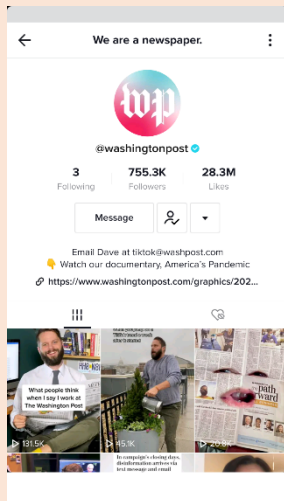
Share of users by age, US, October 2020



Source: Wallaroo

¹ There are ongoing concerns about censorship on TikTok, notably after the suspension of an account that criticized the Chinese government’s abuse of the Uighur ethnic minority. TikTok claims it does not censor accounts due to political sensitivities, but the emphasis on keep content lighthearted is worrying. It is important that strong, independent media are a bigger part of the conversation and steer the platform in the right direction – making their voices as loud as possible.

Examples of media on TikTok



Media: The Washington Post (USA)

Followers: 755K / **Likes:** 28.3M

Approach: Washington Post was one of the first media to embark on their TikTok journey – they started to post regularly in May 2019. Most videos are recorded by one person.

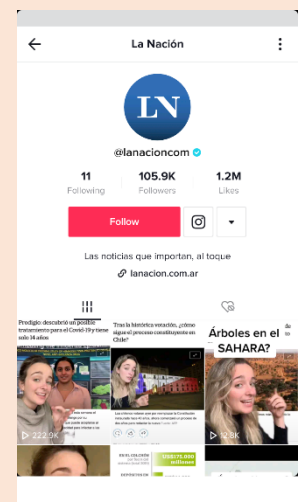
Dave Jorgenson, also known as “The Washington Post TikTok Guy” runs the account in the form of a blog about journalism, with a mix of amusing sketches and of course news presented in a creative manner.

Media: La Nación (Argentina)

Followers: 106K / **Likes:** 1.2M

Approach: This prominent Argentinian media entered TikTok in October 2019. At first, videos were published without regularity, by different people and with middling results.

But the account took off in July 2020 when Sofía Altuna became a host. She picks interesting news articles on a range of different topics and explains them to viewers in her unique energetic style.

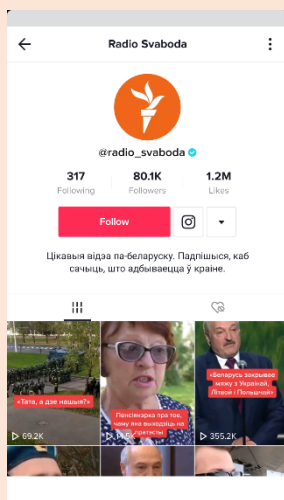


Media: Radio Svaboda (Belarus)

Followers: 80K / **Likes:** 1.2M

Approach: The Belarusian RFE/RL service, Radio Svaboda is a rare case of a media TikTok account dedicated solely to informative news. It wasn't really popular at first, but the mass protests since August 2020 changed everything – the account blew up with some videos getting over a million views.

A lot of videos feature the ruling strongman Alyaksandr Lukashenka and these usually get the biggest traffic.



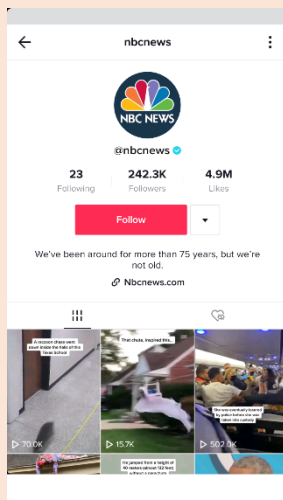
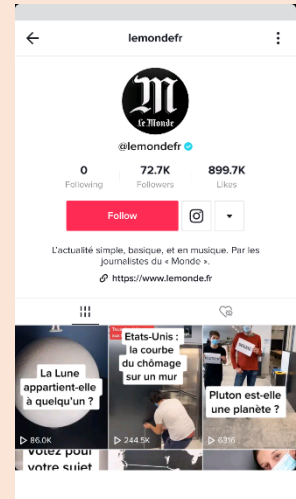
Examples of media on TikTok (2/2)

Media: Le Monde (France)

Followers: 73K / **Likes:** 900K

Approach: The account of one of the biggest French media is run by a team of people who appear in its videos, unlike The Washington Post with its single host.

Most pieces are done in the form of humorous explainers – often featuring props and graphics – with the most popular reaching 200-400k of views. Science, technology and important policy issues are among the most frequent topics.



Media: NBC News (USA)

Followers: 242K / **Likes:** 4.9M

Approach: TikTok account NBC News doesn't have one host that appears on all the video. The company took an approach of preparing short informative and funny video with subtitles and narrators voice explaining it.

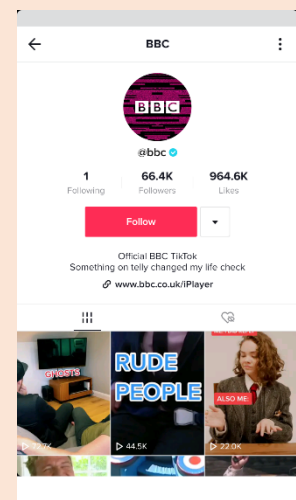
This sort of caption video approach seems to be successful – videos often receive more than a million views and got widely shared across TikTok.

Media: BBC (UK)

Followers: 66K / **Likes:** 965K

Approach: BBC joined TikTok just a few months ago – in September 2020 – but have been growing fast since. Their TikTok content is often composed of fragments of their own TV shows and is run by a number of hosts who usually appear in some funny sketches.

The BBC TikTok account doesn't feature almost any news at all – most of its videos are aimed at making viewers laugh.



How TikTok actually works

The biggest difference between TikTok and social media networks like Facebook or Instagram is the idea of the For-You-Page, a personalized feed that shows users new content from unknown creators rather than prioritized content from people you follow.

TikTok algorithms are very good at predicting what you might like. According to a 2019 [study](#), TikTok has the longest average session duration in United States (10.85 min) – three times better than the results of Twitter or Instagram.

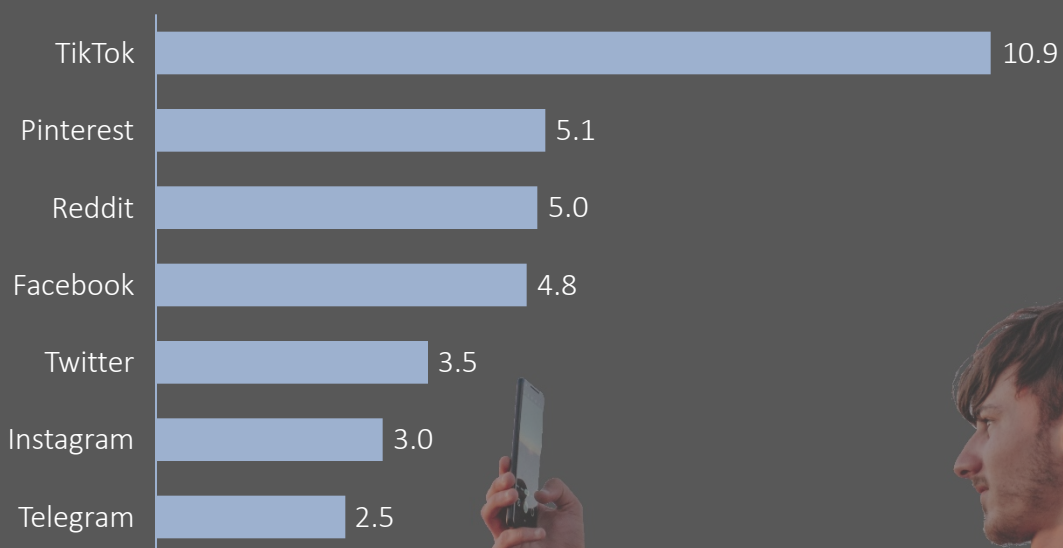
Although there is no official data about how TikTok algorithms work, there have been quite a few attempts to reverse-engineer it. TikTok recommendations are powered by an artificial intelligence model that identifies what's going on in the video you uploaded (e.g. a girl is playing football and singing, or a politician is giving a speech) and then tries to predict an initial sample of audience that will enjoy this video.

The main goal at this stage is to identify whether video is engaging. We don't know the exact metrics, but experts assume they include re-watch rate, completion rate, amount of shares, likes, comments.

Engagement king – TikTok shows the best results of audience engagement

Average session duration; minutes, US, November 2019

■ Session duration



Source: Statista

Photo Johan Mouchet (Unsplash)



How TikTok actually works (cont.)

If the audience sample reacts positively to your video, it will be shown to wider audience sample and so on and so on. This creates snowball effect that can make your video viral despite having no prior audience.

According to Bozhena Sheremeta, marketing specialist and TikTok researcher, “this is why TikTok is seen as a unique chance to start from zero and gain worldwide popularity without investment or prior social media fame”.

The metrics compiled by TikTok are also believed to serve another purpose – to update your personalized feed. This helps better predict the content that will be tested out on you, driving up time spent on the app and thus ensuring the spectator side of the equation is also covered.

TikTok assumed algorithm flow

Source: veed.io

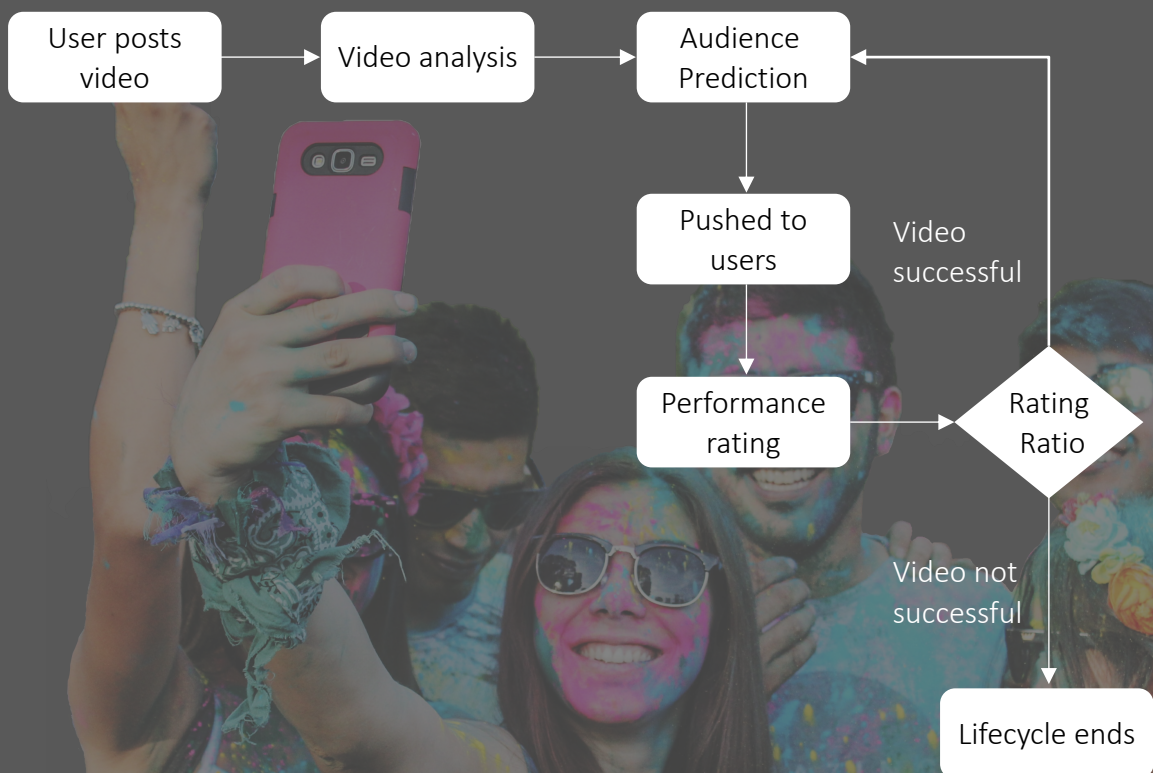
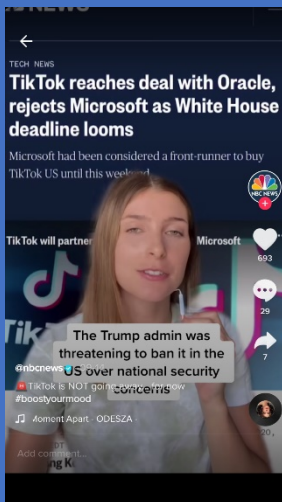


Photo: Julián Gentilezza (Unsplash)

Types of content strategy

There are several dimensions that determine a media's approach to creating TikTok content, including the number of hosts (one vs. many), the information vs. entertainment balance, and the choice of topics (current events, important social/ political issues, trending themes etc.).

Success on TikTok is all about finding a unique and creative way to tell your story (and making sure it aligns with your goals). That said, here are a few types of content strategy:



News reporting

Given that users personalized feeds are not chronological, TikTok is not the best platform for break news or current events.

But that doesn't mean publishers can't cover news, especially if it will stay relevant for a while. Argentina's La Nación successfully covered the Global Climate Strike with posts on making a positive eco-impact. Keys to success include a balance between info and entertainment, and a charismatic host (usually one or a very limited number so viewers can build a relationship).

You can also take popular memes and inject news-related content, or insert fun facts into reports (e.g., USA Today explained that during the impeachment trial senators could only to drink water and milk).

Explainers

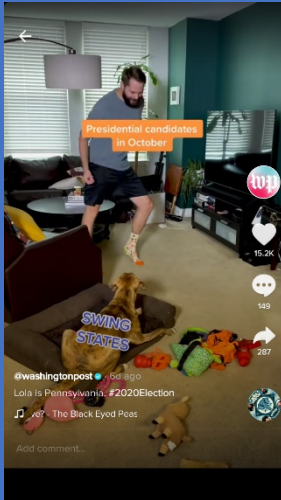
Several publishers have cracked the code for injecting educational content into their TikTok feeds with well-produced explainer videos on big stories. Interestingly, these usually come from a team of hosts rather than a single anchor (focus on content vs. personality)

In Australia, The Guardian had a very successful explainer on the bushfires earlier this years (it got 10k likes vs. their typical couple hundred), while Germany's Tagesschau broke the 100k mark with a recent explainer on the COVID-19 outbreak.

In turn, France's Le Monde produces a lot on science, tech, sociology and history, ranging from lunar property rights to dinosaur rankings.



Types of content strategy



Journalist v-log

People connect with people, which is why some media have gone for the v-log approach – typically focusing on a single, charismatic host who is running the account (or at most a small team).

TikTok appears to be a place for people, not for brands, argues Adriana Lacy, audience engagement editor at The Los Angeles Times, adding that Gen Z is more invested in people and relationships than companies and institutions.

When The Dallas Morning News launched their TikTok account, they posted a Full House-style intro of their whole audience team. In Switzerland, 20 Minuten achieved this “personal feeling” by posting relatable moments from around the office such as a recent video about the excitement of leaving work on a Friday.

Entertainment

While many media have struggled to turn fact-filled newsfeeds into TikTok videos, others have gone the opposite direction.

Arguably the best example of this approach is the UK’s Daily Mail, which has embraced funny sketches and cute pets – often filmed by the viewers themselves (thus reducing costs) – to build a following of 1.2 million and over 33 million likes. In turn, the BBC opted to focus on posting short clips from its shows, rather than news content.

This approach is most likely aimed the future monetization of the account, or brand recognition. Just remember to bring viewers back to your main products/ have a call to action, to not waste the effort.



5 steps to launch a TikTok account

- 1 DEFINE WHY YOU NEED A TIKTOK** – TikTok gives you access to a huge audience, but you need to know what you want to do with it. Media and businesses use it for a range of reasons – to get younger crowds to learn about them, to distribute content, earn money or drive people into their main funnel. Figure out why you need the platform before jumping in
- 2 DEFINE THE TARGET AUDIENCE** – learn more about your audience to understand them better and create a product that will really meet their needs. Think about what your viewers like, what makes them smile, their demographics and what device they use (types and operating systems). In short anything that can both help you tailor content and set precise targets
- 3 PICK A CONTENT STRATEGY** – choose which type and format of content you will use to reach your audience. Research other TikTok accounts, identify interesting trends and brainstorm with your team to develop your own creative approach. Important questions to resolve are one or many hosts, balance between information and entertainment and types of topics you want to cover
- 4 HIRE THE RIGHT PERSON TO RUN THE ACCOUNT** – you need an expert with experience in creating video content (especially in vertical format). Pick someone who naturally fits the platform and “speaks its language.” This person will register and run your account, so make sure they fully understand who you’re targeting, your business model, and priorities, as well as your monetization strategy
- 5 PREPARE THE RELEASE AND PROMO ACTIVITIES** – plan how you will promote you account, which channels of communications will be used to reach the target audience. Build a funnel to drive traffic to your TikTok! Make sure you account has enough cool content before the release (prepare some spare, evergreen videos)

Tips to remember



Remember what audience you are working with. TikTok is a platform popular with young people, who come there to have fun, not to listen to patronizing lectures



Interact with the audience. Leave a call to action in your videos. E.g., ask a question related to the topic of the video and ask people to answer it in the comments



Follow the trends. New formats and challenges appear every day on TikTok. If you want to stay on top, embrace the trends and reflect them in your videos. Look at what's already successful on the app and put your own spin on it



Use first-person narratives. TikTok is changing fast. There are lots of organizational accounts arriving as more brands and outlets sign up, but the best-performing content at the moment tends to be in first-person narrative.



Pick your tone of voice. E.g., Washington Post chose a corny, dad-joke style. Find the tone that works best for you and your audience and stick to it in most videos



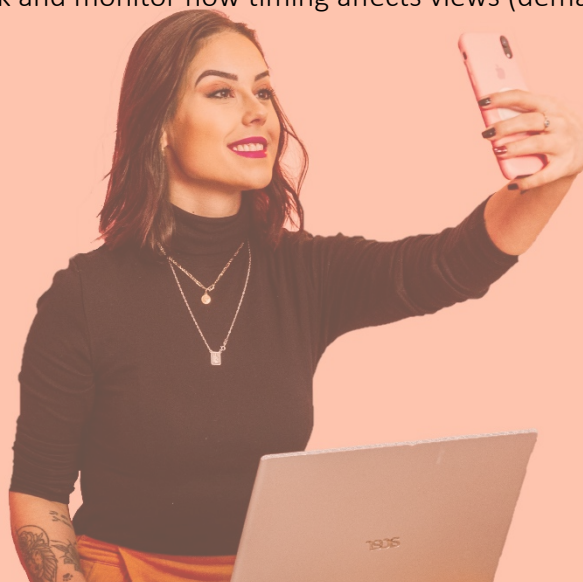
Don't go on a platform if you have nothing to say on it. News organizations' success on TikTok depends on their effort and ability to understand audience needs. Plan your content strategy before you create an account



Curate and share user generated content. Brands get the best return on efforts when they can get users to provide input and integrate it into their content plans



Post often and at the right time. The life of a single video on TikTok is short. Don't expect lots of views weeks after a video was uploaded. Publish at least a couple of videos per week and monitor how timing affects views (demand goes in waves)



Lifehacks to drive traffic



Drive traffic from other channels

Leverage your other social media accounts to build a funnel and drive people to your newly launched TikTok. Instagram stories is one of the most efficient ways as there is a lot of overlap, but use all the tools you have



Partnerships with TikTok creators

Collaboration might be very successful way for you to get noticed. Record a joint video with another creator, start a joint challenge or record a reply-video to their content. All of this will help you grow your audience



Competitions for your subscribers

Competition for your subscribers resemble Instagram rallies – to participate, users have to like and comment on your video. This works well for commercial partnerships with the partner providing some perks or merchandise



Use the sound and hashtags

Hashtags and popular sounds (click on the bottom right corner disc on TikTok to learn more) are key to going viral. These tools will can get you noticed by TikTok algorithms that search for similarities to create a personalized feed



Hashtag challenges

Pair up with TikTok influencers and launch branded hashtag challenges for users to take up. If successful, challenges can bring hundreds of millions of views, quick follower growth, and a huge boost in brand awareness



TikTok advertising

TikTok for Business is a platform to buy ads. Its still a work in process but interest is growing. You can boost your video and then ride the organic traffic. It worked for Instagram stories and it looks like TikTok will be the same

TikTok initiatives

TikTok for Good

The main idea of the initiative is to inspire users, especially younger ones, to do good for the planet and people. Users can find an organization's account, support it and help share important ideas. This can include using promoted hashtags and creating content for the organizations involved

Examples of campaigns:

#EduTok – encourages users to create educational and motivational content around a variety of themes.

#ForClimate – spreading climate change awareness. Special effects, filters and stickers are available to share knowledge about climate change, draw attention to the impacts of extreme weather, and urged people to better protect our planet.



TikTok Social partnership

TikTok also is open to partnerships with media organizations, social initiatives and programs to share knowledge and raise awareness about important topics

Examples of campaigns:

- Partnership with Associate Press dedicated to the US Presidential elections to display live results
- Fact-checking project with French news agency AFP to combat disinfo
- Ukraine's Ministry of Digital Information and TikTok conducted a campaign on positive behavior on social networks
- #LearnOnTikTok Educational Initiative funded over 800 institutions, media publishers, public figures, and real-world experts to create educational content

Useful links and resources

Hope you've enjoyed this report!

To learn more about the weird and wonderful world of TikTok, here are a couple of interesting links and resources you might want to check out:

- [The TikTok University](#) – a beginner's guide produced by the company itself on everything how to create a profile to adding special effects in videos. It's done through the prism of TikTok videos, which is both fitting but also irritating, as you need to download the app to access the content
- This [video](#) will help you get acquainted with the app interface. You will see a phone screen of someone using TikTok. It explains all features, icons and buttons
- [Wallaroo](#) – digital marketing agency that has TikTok stats and shares new trends. Key TikTok figures will continuously be refreshed as new data becomes available
- [A guide about TikTok for universities](#) – step-by-step explanation how to set up your brand page, what do you need for that, and how to manage it. Built for Unis, but pretty helpful for any institution looking to make it on the platform
- [List of trending hashtags](#) – current list of trending hashtags for 2020 to use to get more traffic or help you create your own hashtag. The web service also provides a search engine of the most popular TikTok hashtags by country every day
- [A guide on how to add clickable link](#) which will allow users to add a bolded clickable link directly on their profile
- [TikTok Money Calculator](#) will calculate potential earnings from your TikTok account (as if you were an influencer), based on your engagement and number of followers
- [TikTok Video Guide](#) will explain how to make and edit TikTok Videos to become popular. The guide also provides a list of ideas for videos

Report background

This report was prepared thanks to the support of International Media Support and is based on interviews with TikTok and social media experts, analysis of media working on TikTok, and a review of the available research.

About International Media Support

IMS operates in countries affected by armed conflict or political transition to support local media with the goal of reducing conflict and strengthening democracy. IMS is active across 4 continents, working to promote press freedom, save journalists' lives and pave the way for good journalism and reliable access to information for everyone

About hromadske

hromadske was founded in 2013 by a collective of journalists fighting censorship under strongman president Viktor Yanukovych. Its mission was to provide Ukrainian audiences with content that is free of political or oligarchic influence and is useful, inspiring, and informative. It has a focus on engaging with younger active audiences and places an emphasis on talking to them in their language and on their platforms

About The Fix

The Fix is a media about media that takes a solution lens to covering the industry, with an emphasis on emerging markets and innovations coming from outside the media bubble. In addition to publishing articles, The Fix works with a core community of senior media managers and researchers to produce in-depth case studies and industry reports



TheFix

We would like to thank all the people who helped put this report together, including Mariia Leonova (Head of Social Media and Comms at hromadske), Zakhar Protsiuk (Community Editor at The Fix), and Natalia Kindrativ (Research analyst at The Fix).

For further information reach out to pr@hromadske.ua or info.thefixmedia@gmail.com.