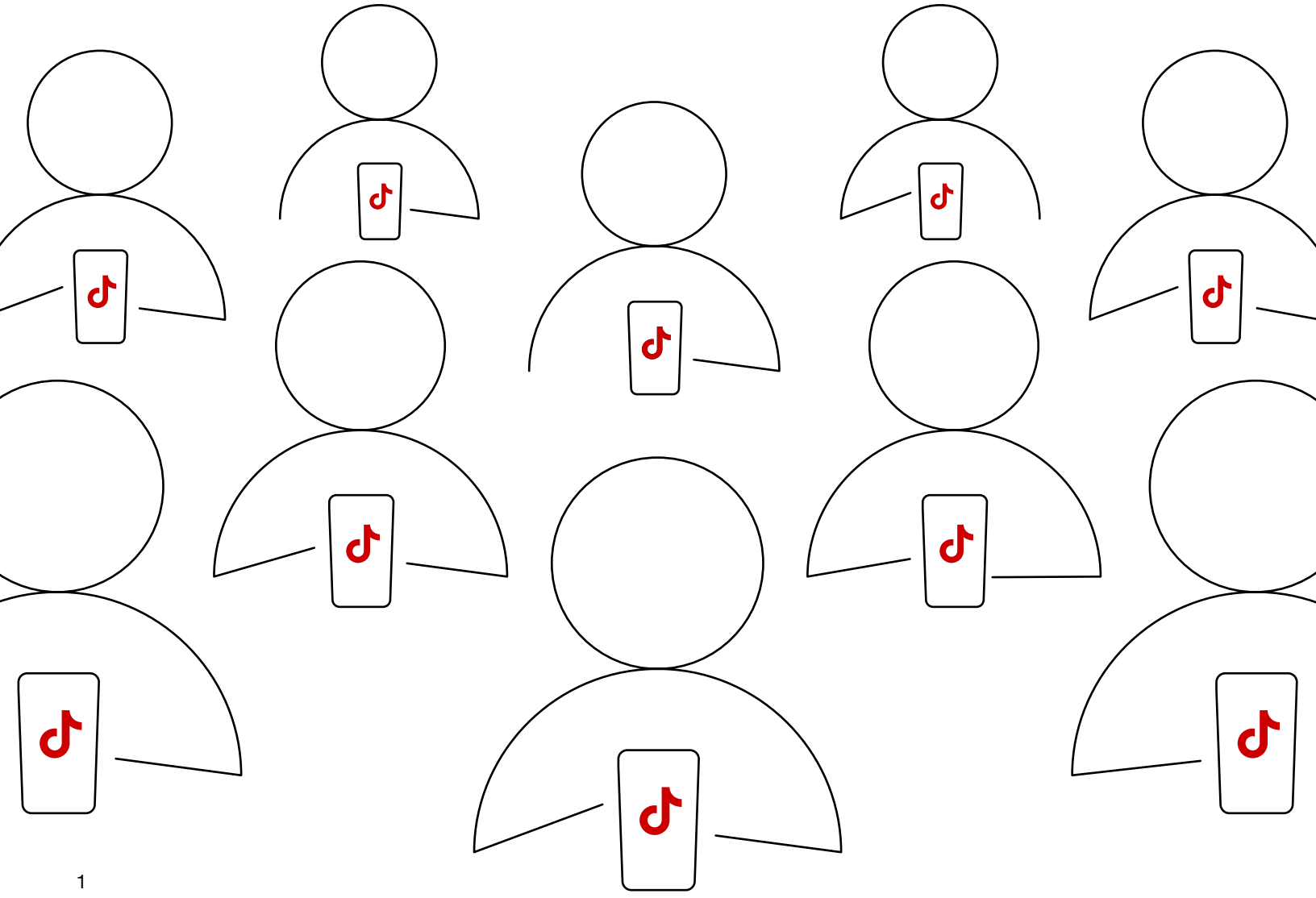
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The TikTok Conundrum

Despite the first state ban and Congressional debates on a national ban, TikTok is as popular as ever. But how should journalists use it to engage with news consumers?

This article is part of a Newsource series on Journalism and Social Media platforms. For related content see Journalism and the Next Wave of Twitter.



Becoming TikTok

November 2017

Chinese company ByteDance acquires Musical.ly to expand its footprint in the United States, rebranding it as TikTok.

January 2018

TikTok has over 11 million active users in the United States.

October 2019

TikTok's monthy active users in the United States more than triple to nearly 40 million.

March 2020

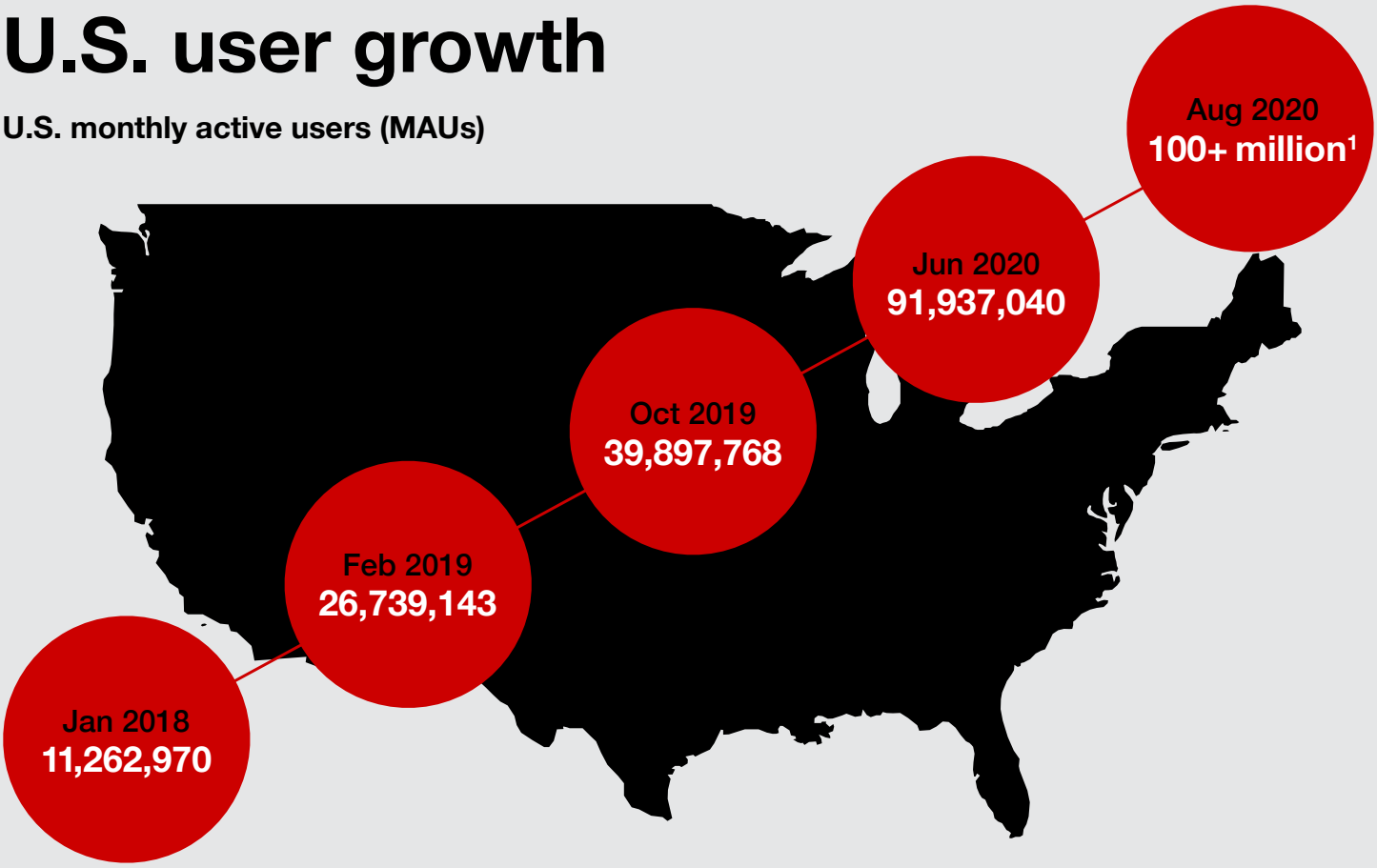
COVID locks down the world, and people of all generations look for ways to entertain themselves. TikTok usage surges, catapulting into mainstream. Food trends like bread baking are popular.

August 2020

Just five months into the pandemic, TikTok grows to more than 100 million monthly active users. As the appeal and user numbers climb, journalists and news outlets take notice.

Breakdown of TikTok's U.S. user growth

U.S. monthly active users (MAUs)

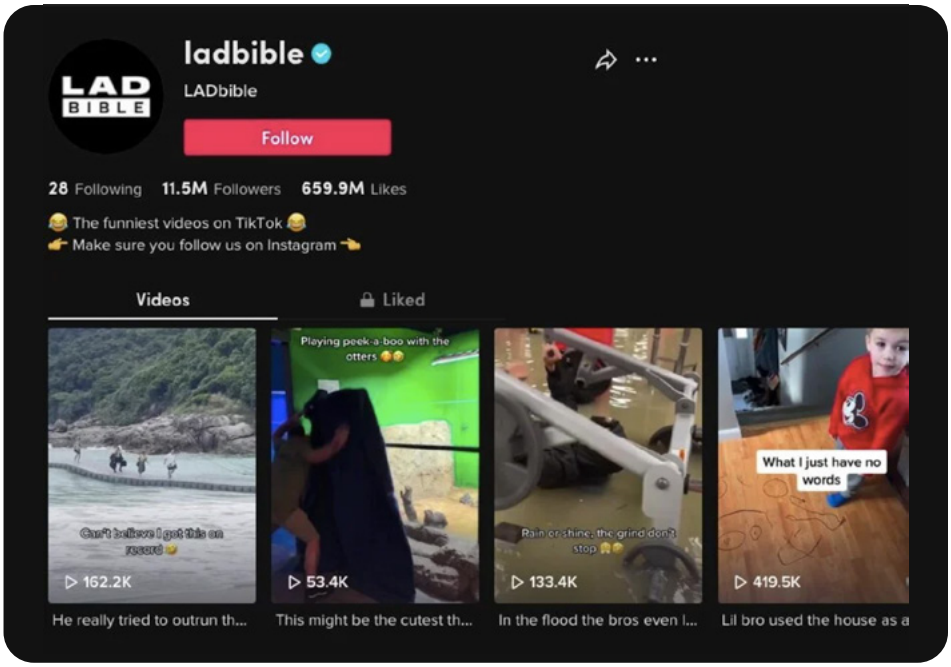


1. based on quarterly usage (CNBC)

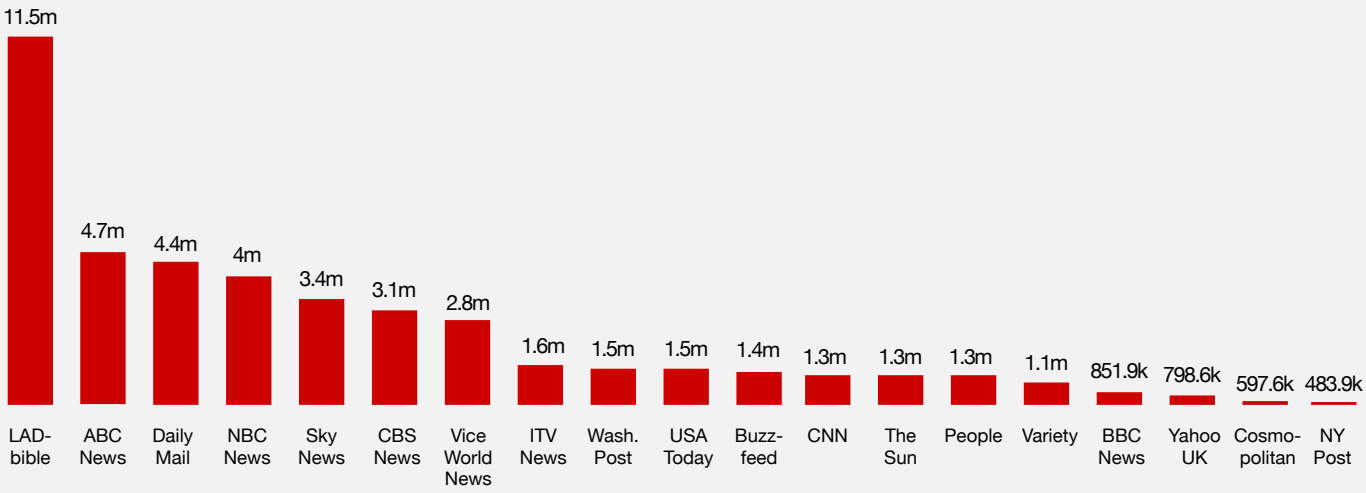
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TikTok as a source of news

As the country moves beyond the pandemic, TikTok's audience climbs, and the subjects covered continue to broaden. Relatively new social news brands, such as LADbible which bills itself as redefining "entertainment and news for a social generation," (LADbible Group) takes advantage of this growth and evolves from a viral Facebook publisher to a "fully-fledged news operation" (Press Gazette). As of January 2023, LADbible's TikTok follower count was over 11.5 million, more than double that of ABC News which held the number two spot at 4.7 million.



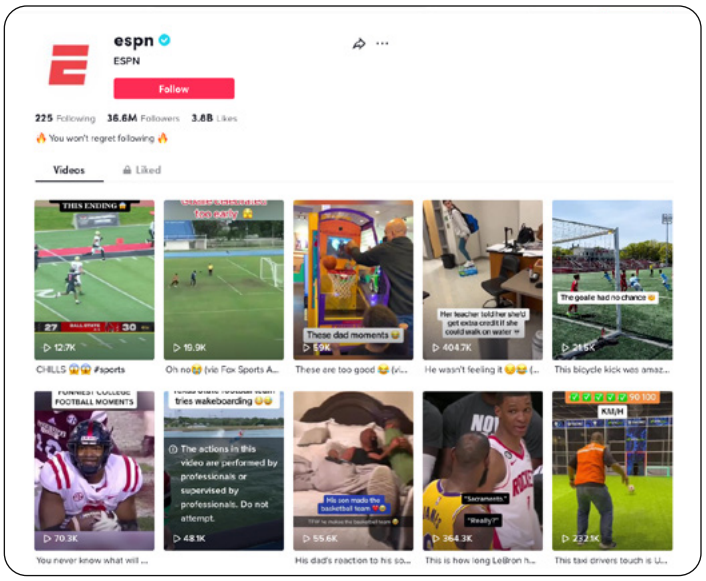
Newsbrands in Press Gazette's UK and US Top 50 with the biggest followings on TikTok



Follower counts as of 23 January 2023 / Source: TikTok

More traditional news brands are also embracing the platform. In 2022, TikTok was cited in the Reuters Digital News Report as the fastest-growing news source, reaching 40% of consumers ages 18-24 worldwide. ESPN has successfully used the TikTok platform, boasting over 36 million followers and 3.7 billion likes as of June 2023.

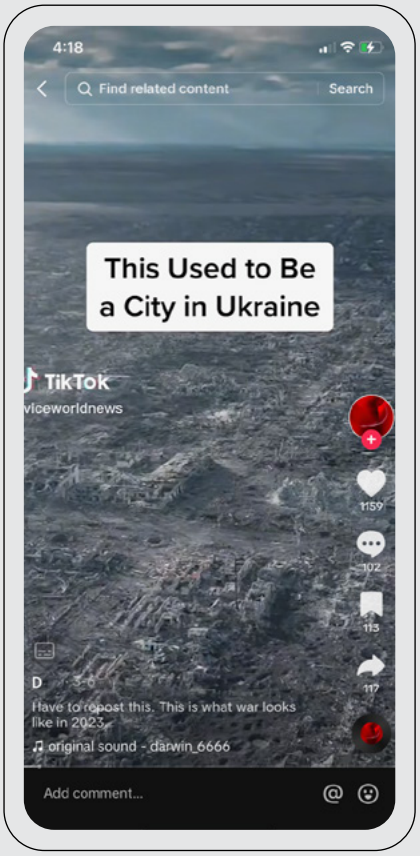
But sports isn't the only news category finding an audience with TikTok viewers. As the Reuters Institute states, "Until recently the network had a reputation built almost exclusively on fast-moving, funny, or musical memes, but stories such as Black Lives Matter, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine have helped make news a much bigger part of the mix."

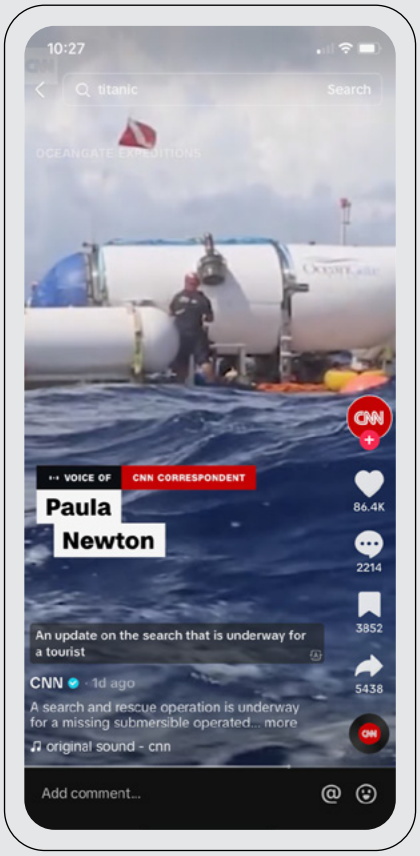


TikTok controversies

1. The Trump administration tried to ban the app, citing threats to national security. This year, the Biden administration and Congress have discussed various measures, including a national ban, partly due to the company's 2022 admission of spying on journalists. TikTok executives at first denied, then later acknowledged and denounced the incident, but the damage was done. Calls to restrict or ban the app became one of few topics to unite a bi-partisan Congress.

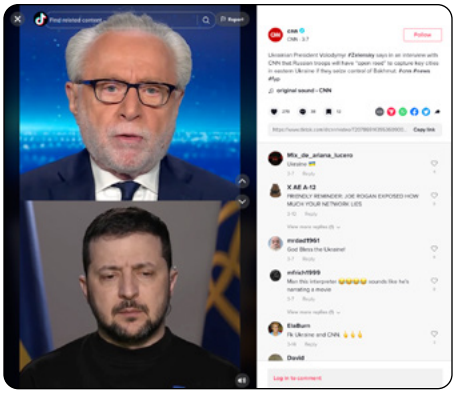
2. Over twenty states have banned the app on state-owned devices. In May 2023, Montana's governor Greg Gianforte signed legislation to ban TikTok from operating in the state by making it unlawful for the Apple and Google app stores to offer TikTok (Reuters). While this law may face legal challenges, it is due to go into effect in January 2024.





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Including TikTok in your multi-platform strategy



Despite its controversies, TikTok may end up being especially hard to ban nationally due to its popularity, especially with younger consumers—who also happen to be current and future voters. The politicians considering bans know this well. As commerce secretary Gina Raimondo, who has endorsed a bi-partisan bill to have her department oversee the app stated, "The politician in me thinks you're gonna literally lose every voter under 35 forever" (Bloomberg News).

This fear is backed by usage numbers. Per the *Washington Post*:



No app has grown beyond a billion users faster. More than 100 million TikTok users are in the United States, roughly a third of the country.

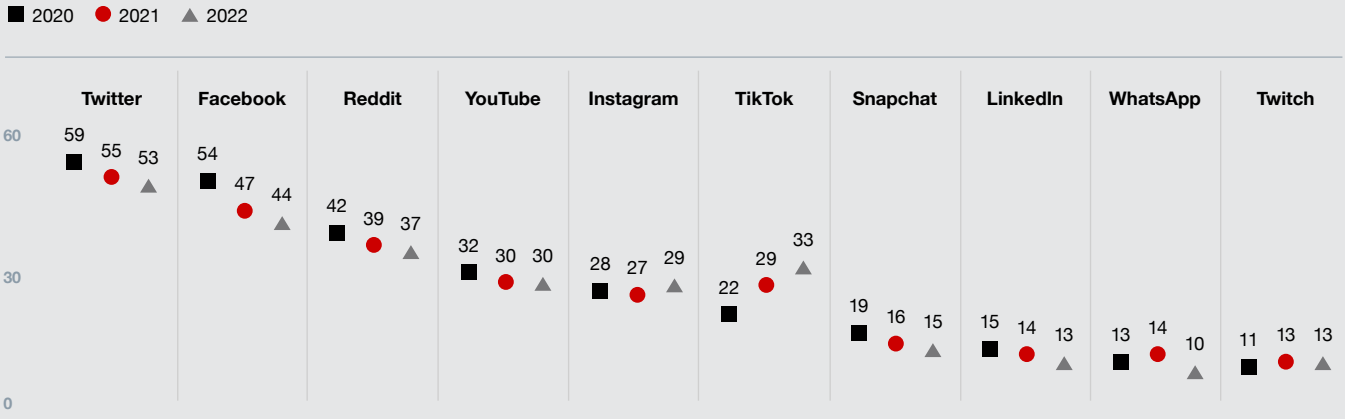


The average American viewer watches TikTok for 80 minutes a day—more than the time spent on Facebook and Instagram, combined.

Like all social media journalism, it is imperative to consider the platform and what kinds of content perform well. One of the biggest factors in favor of TikTok is its authenticity. Per the Washington Post "… as Americans' trust in news organizations has fallen, TikTok's role as a news source has climbed. One in three TikTok viewers in the United States said they regularly use it to learn about current events, Pew Research Center said last month."

TikTok's website was visited last year more often than Google.

Social media sites by percentage of users who regularly get news there



Note: Nextdoor was first asked about this year so there is no trend data.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 18-Aug. 21, 2022.

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TikTok Engagement Tips

1 Be authentic



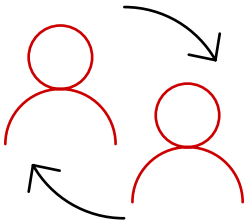
While Instagram is known for having especially beautiful, curated content, for TikTok the focus is more about subject matter expertise. According to social media talent manager Daniel Daks, “TikTok messaging is effective because it is authentic, involving real people speaking directly to audiences that trust them” (New York Magazine).

2 Use humor



Humor is part of TikTok’s DNA and is a good way to break the ice and establish a presence on the platform. This strategy has been successfully used by journalist David Jorgenson of the Washington Post, who started by “trying to match the expectations for fun that come with TikTok with the brand values of a 144-year-old legacy news organization” (Reuters Institute).

3 Use a personal angle



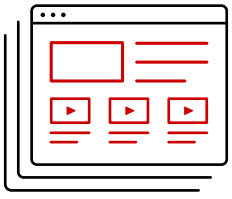
TikTok creators often speak to their audience the way they would speak to a friend. Finding a personal connection with viewers can help form a community beyond just news reporting. The News Movement, a social partnership between the BBC and Wall Street Journal, advises that “young people identify more with personalities than they do with brands” (Reuters Institute).

4 Create trust before moving to more serious topics



Finding news content that overlaps with moments in popular culture or light-hearted topics can help journalists learn what connects with an audience and set the stage for more serious content. And combining these topics with a trusted personality can help news content get an even stronger foothold in the platform.

5 Diversity your channels



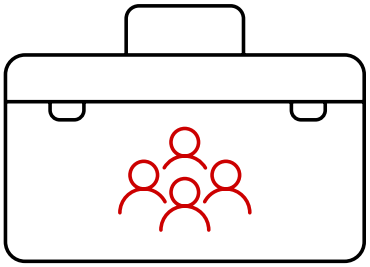
TikTok is more likely than other social media apps to face restrictions, and it’s important to understand your own personal security.

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The Takeaway

TikTok is an important tool in a journalist's toolbox, especially for connecting with younger audiences less engaged in traditional platforms. Even if TikTok isn't banned, privacy concerns may change its growth trajectory. Using TikTok authentically to connect and grow your audience, while understanding the current national conversation around privacy concerns, is key to a balanced strategy.



CNN Newsource understands what it takes to win in the digital space. We work closely with our network of 1,000+ local news partners to offer valuable insights relevant to the news business while providing powerful, trusted news content.

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