

## Is TikTok “for” News? Sociotechnical Frictions and Workarounds in Environmental News Events on TikTok

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By examining three distinct environmental news events—a protest, a policy, and a disaster—this article explores how social media companies shape public debate through the design of their platforms. TikTok’s technical infrastructure most readily supports vertical video, disallows timestamps and hyperlinks, and compels participation in algorithmic trends; each of these introduces frictions to conventional journalistic and science communication practices, disadvantaging news content from established sources in particular. Some creators circumvented these technical frictions, with mixed success, occasionally leading to unanticipated negative consequences for the broader news media ecology. This article contributes to the scholarly conceptualization of affordances—not as inflexible walls that delineate use, but as frictions that can be overcome. Finally, this article concludes with practical recommendations for creators and journalists on how to negotiate both TikTok’s entrenched platform vernacular and its restrictive technical affordances.

*Keywords: climate communication, platform vernacular, social media affordances, short-form video, TikTok*

TikTok has emerged as a major site of public discourse. It is not only a platform for entertainment but also increasingly a destination for news and politics, including discussions about climate change. The platform itself has publicly embraced this shift, claiming to elevate causes like climate advocacy and positioning itself as a hub for environmental content (TikTok Newsroom, 2022). Yet beneath these promotional narratives lies a more complicated reality: As many scholars and journalists have pointed out, TikTok is not purpose-built for news (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2020). It lacks basic features that could support news circulation, such as time stamps and hyperlink embedding. Its design prioritizes immersion and participation, both of which work against the traditional norms, values, and production processes of news organizations. As creators, journalists, and news institutions attempt to communicate urgent environmental

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issues on the platform, they encounter sociotechnical “frictions” that shape which content can be effectively conveyed and which can be distorted or rendered invisible.

This article is organized around several pairs of frictions and subsequent ad-hoc user “workarounds.” These friction-workaround pairs became evident while examining TikTok content posted across three environmental news case studies: a protest, a policy, and a disaster. This article has two goals. First, it aims to advance the scholarly conversation on platform affordances by integrating the concepts of “design friction” (Tomalin, 2023) and “platform vernacular” (Gibbs et al., 2015). I argue that this scholarly conversation overlooks the importance of understanding the platform vernacular as a counterpart to designed affordances. As the case studies will show, conforming to the sociocultural demands of the platform vernacular—shared language, cultures, and social expectations—may be just as important as conforming to the platform’s affordances. Surprisingly often, conforming to the vernacular means actively circumventing platform affordances. Second, this article provides practical advice to creators producing news on TikTok, highlighting the importance of engaging with networked conversations and trends (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). The multimodal content analysis shows that many legacy news organizations, in particular, fail to do this. In most cases, this failure leads only to low viewership, but in one case, it provided the foundation for a more toxic, anti-environmental discourse to foment.

These frictions are not insurmountable. As this article will highlight, some environmental communicators use TikTok effectively to draw attention to important environmental problems. Moreover, these sociotechnical frictions are neither unique to environmental discourses nor exclusive to TikTok. While this article focuses on three specific environmental news case studies, it also aims to speak to TikTok’s broader capacity as a news distribution platform, and its conceptual offerings may prove useful for analyzing other platforms and social media technologies.

### **Affordances, Vernaculars, and Social Media Journalism**

This article builds upon three areas of critical communication and social media research: affordance theories, platform vernaculars, and social media journalism. First, I surface arguments from researchers who assert that platform affordances are not simply “features” or “limitations” that bound user behavior, but are themselves regularly contested by users. I extend this line of argument by uniting affordance literature with several design perspectives on “friction,” a useful concept for understanding the role of affordances. Then, I discuss the critical role of the TikTok “platform vernacular,” which describes the many cultures and languages that have emerged within the platform’s communities. I conclude this section by discussing existing studies of climate communication and news on TikTok, reiterating the urgent importance of understanding this platform as a major actor in the online news ecology.

### ***Affordances and Frictions***

Central to media scholars’ understanding of Internet platforms is the concept of “affordances,” which describes the continuum of possibilities enabled and constrained by the infrastructural elements of a platform (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 16). Affordance theory draws attention to both the technical and social elements of technology, referring to how infrastructure is designed and its social effects. Affordances have historically

referred to the uses enabled by a platform's technical design. TikTok, for instance, supports short-form video, the use of "likes," and the creative use of special video effects, while (until recently) prohibiting videos shot in a horizontal aspect ratio. However, media and technology scholars have noted how affordance theory has lent itself to deterministic overstatements about the power of design to unilaterally influence user behavior (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Studies have shown how users regularly contest platforms' intended uses (Duguay, 2020; Nagy & Neff, 2015), illustrating how technical affordances are neither immutable nor impermeable barriers. Instead, they are socially negotiated by users through processes of social sensemaking and construction (Duguay, 2020; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015; Nagy & Neff, 2015). Furthermore, platforms continuously update their designed affordances (Duffy et al., 2019), for instance, to introduce new features or encourage new uses (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) or to accommodate and inscribe emergent social behaviors (Burgess & Baym, 2020). Affordances both shape and are shaped by their users.

Some design affordances, intentionally or not, frustrate specific practices or aims users might seek to pursue (Popiel & Vasudevan, 2024). In design fields, friction has traditionally been understood as an obstacle to be overcome in the pursuit of a seamless user experience (Tomalin, 2023). Platforms may introduce or alleviate technical frictions to discourage or encourage certain behaviors or kinds of content (Tomalin, 2023). For users, a tremendous amount of labor is put into creating content that fits within these invisible and ever-shifting sociotechnical boundaries (Simpson & Semaan, 2023). Alternatively, users may work around frictions altogether (Duguay, 2020; Maddox, 2021). Several researchers have studied how TikTok's unique affordances shape its content by studying, for instance, how its restrictive maximum duration pressures creators to "[make] every second count" (Hayes et al., 2020) and to lean into the visual novelty of the content (Zeng et al., 2020). Other researchers have pointed out design choices that guide users to interact with other users via memetic production—content that engages with other content (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Collie & Wilson-Barnao, 2020; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). This memetic foundation constitutes what Zulli and Zulli (2022) call "imitation publics," a highly affective sociality organized around these imitative affordances.

### ***Platform Vernaculars and Incongruous Content***

Affordances help shape a "platform vernacular" that is constantly evolving. A platform's vernacular—its unofficial rhetoric, humor, and lingo—both shapes and is shaped by the platform's technical affordances (Gibbs et al., 2015). Importantly, however, design affordances alone do not determine the forms and styles of user-generated content on a platform. Platform vernaculars are influenced not only by a platform's designed affordances but also by its social practices. Vernaculars may be platform-wide or spoken by subsets of users. The TikTok recommendation algorithm conspicuously arranges creators around trends, topics, and cultures (Abidin, 2020, p. 79), contributing to the construction of the many overlapping "sides" of TikTok (Maddox & Gill, 2023), each with its own vernacular.

Early research on TikTok portrayed the platform as a space for fun—viral dances, catchy sounds, and memeable visual effects (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2020). The platform has since evolved, both in its technical affordances and in its user ecology. This early research tried to elucidate reasons TikTok was able to cultivate this "fun" space while many other social networks faced a crisis of toxic content (Phillips & Milner, 2021). Researchers posited that TikTok's affordances produced an affinity for content focused on performances of self-identity and self-expression (Alvermann et al., 2021; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022),

authenticity (Barta & Andalibi, 2021; Rauchberg, 2022), memes (Zulli & Zulli, 2022), and humor (Matamoros-Fernández, 2023; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2020). The vernacular matters because, like technical affordances, it shapes how "registers of meaning and affect are produced" (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 258). On paper, such a "fun" vernacular might be at odds with more "serious" content, but as this research will show, it is more complicated than that.

Hautea et al. (2021) argued that even "funny" TikTok videos about climate change often exemplified ambivalence. Other scholars have written about communities of users who create and engage with emotionally and politically charged content, such as gender identity, finding that TikTok can offer space for such intimately personal content (Alvermann et al., 2021), provided users can "tame" the sociotechnical affordances that occasionally disrupt these ecologies (Simpson et al., 2022). These researchers point out that TikTok's vernacular is not necessarily incompatible with "heavy" content. Rather than triangulating a specific tone, fluency in the vernacular requires engaging with the platform's imitation publics (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Environmental communicators must understand not only a platform's technical affordances but also its myriad digital cultures and vernaculars.

### ***Environmental News on TikTok***

For this article, I adopt a wide conceptualization of what counts as "news," following other work on social media news ecologies (Hendrickx, 2024; Hermida, 2010; Phillips & Milner, 2021). As these scholars argue, tracing information flows and understanding public sensemaking processes are analytically more productive than nitpicking what should or should not count as "news," which, as Hendrickx points out, social media users themselves often define ambiguously.

A well-known study of videos hashtagged #climatechange (or similar) found that while creators expressed strong concern about the environment, this concern was often unfounded and tinged with anxiety and helplessness (Hautea et al., 2021). Hautea et al. (2021) suggested that TikTok's imitative affordances helped create "waves of cascading social connection" (p. 1) that, while often humorous, tended to be nihilistic and demotivating. Another study found that environmental creators overwhelmingly framed environmental issues as a matter of individual responsibility (Huber et al., 2022)—an ineffective and isolating theory of environmental change (Maniates, 2001) that has proven tremendously disengaging in the Western political imaginary—though not a frame unique to TikTok or even social media (Gunster, 2017). Most of these studies agree that climate-related content on TikTok appears to be produced by individuals who are passionate about the issues, if not always well-informed about the best ways to address them.

TikTok content produced by institutions, environmental organizations, journalists, and other trusted information sources has been less studied. Although this content appears to occupy a much smaller share of the ecosystem, it nonetheless represents an important set of actors to study. One study found that organizational accounts posted fewer than 10% of videos tagged #climatechange (Basch et al., 2022). An early study of news content on TikTok found that while many news organizations initially joined the platform, most soon abandoned their profiles (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2020). TikTok complicates the online news arena for journalists and news organizations, who already have complicated relationships with social media sites (Petre, 2015; Poell et al., 2021). Lately, however, news organizations have been making stronger

inroads on the platform. TikTok is one of the few social media sites increasing its share of online news consumption and has become a primary news source for young people (Newman et al., 2023). This is impressive, coming amid a global downturn in overall news consumption (Altay et al., 2024).

News content can attract respectable levels of traffic on TikTok, but the qualities that make it popular may differ from those on other social media platforms. For instance, people who use TikTok for news pay more attention to “personalities” and “ordinary people” than to mainstream sources, while the opposite is true of Twitter/X and Facebook (Newman et al., 2023, p. 13). One study found that TikTok videos about the United Nations Climate Change Conferences were posted primarily by “influencers” (Nieto-Sandoval & Ferré-Pavia, 2024). Hendrickx (2024) notes that news is also consumed differently on TikTok, since users are more likely to encounter news incidentally on the app’s main “For You” page rather than actively seek it out or subscribe to news channels, as is common on other platforms.

TikTok has not explicitly voiced frustration with news content, like representatives of Meta and Twitter/X have (see Hatmaker, 2023), but if the platform’s design affords little compatibility with typical online news practices, this might help explain the popularity of alternative journalism on TikTok. It is also important to acknowledge the underlying assumption that a greater presence of content from established or mainstream sources would necessarily contribute to a “healthier” news ecology on TikTok (Phillips & Milner, 2021). This assumption could be wrong, especially if “personalities” and “ordinary people” have pieced together ways to communicate environmental news more effectively on the platform while still upholding core journalistic values.

Environmental communication is a burgeoning field focused on developing strategies to engage more people in addressing the climate crisis beyond merely raising awareness. Increasingly, scholars recognize that the lack of popular action on climate crises is a complex social problem (Pezzullo & Cox, 2021)—not merely a deficit of information (Gunster, 2017) or an apolitical technological problem (Boykoff et al., 2010). While this article addresses literature on platform affordances and social media journalism, focusing on environmental news provides a clear way to scope this project. Analytically, examining these three distinct environmental news events helps reveal how particular frictions are encountered across disparate yet discursively interconnected news discourses.

### **Methods**

This article sets out to extend this body of research by asking the following questions:

- R1: How are legacy news organizations adapting their content to TikTok, and how does their content compare to ordinary creators and influencers?*
- R2: How do TikTok’s affordances and platform vernaculars shape environmental news content on the platform?*

To explore these questions, I chose three significant environmental news events that occurred between 2021 and 2022: the record-breaking and deadly Pacific Northwest Heat Wave (“Heat Dome”), a

protest in which environmental protestors threw soup at a van Gogh painting (“Soupgate”), and the passing of the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act (“IRA”), which together spanned three distinct environmental discourses of disaster, protest, and policy.

### **Sample Collection**

To collect the sample, I used an unofficial API (TikAPI), a common approach in TikTok studies (e.g., Basch et al., 2022; Hautea et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Lovett et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2022). I created a new account before collecting videos for each case study and searched for combinations of related terms, generating a collection of 72,440 videos, many of which were duplicates. I also collected each video’s metadata, including the number of plays and comments, its audio track, and the author’s follower count and biography text, among others. Filtering out duplicates left 2,389 unique videos across all three case studies. The sample was further slimmed to contain only videos posted within a specified date range, determined by watching the videos for relevance. For example, videos posted in the Heat Dome sample rapidly became less relevant about one week after the heat wave subsided, so videos posted after July 3, 2021, were excluded. This inclusion criterion effectively filtered out most irrelevant videos, generating a final sample of 471 videos across the three case studies.

I then categorized all the collected TikTok accounts into five types (Table 1). The official accounts of news organizations, environmental nongovernmental organizations (ENGOS), and “others” (brands, celebrities, and politicians) were categorized manually according to how the user self-identified in their account biography section. For instance, if a creator specifically identified as a journalist or an account biography linked to a news website, they were categorized as a news account. The “influencer” and “ordinary” account types were operationalized by follower counts and the total number of videos they had posted. An account was considered an “influencer” if it had more than 10,000 followers and more than 50 videos and was not already coded as an official account.<sup>2</sup> All other accounts were considered “ordinary” accounts. The case studies had vastly different proportions of account types, indicating that each case study would be ecologically unique.

**Table 1. Videos per Account Type.**

	<b>Heat Dome</b>		<b>Protest</b>		<b>IRA</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>ENGOS</b>	1	0.5%	2	1.6%	1	0.7%	4	0.1%
<b>Influencers</b>	51	24.4%	50	40.3%	40	28.8%	141	30.0%
<b>News</b>	4	1.9%	27	21.7%	55	39.6%	86	18.2%
<b>Ordinary</b>	151	72.2%	38	30.6%	31	22.3%	220	46.7%
<b>Others</b>	2	0.9%	7	5.6%	11	7.9%	20	0.4%
<b>Total</b>	209		124		139		471	

<sup>2</sup> In this study, I use the terms “influencer” and “content creator” somewhat interchangeably, although both terms are slippery (see Bishop, 2021).

### **Multimodal Analysis**

To further explore the ecologies of each case study and identify how frictions may have shaped the content, a thorough qualitative analysis was necessary. I drew inspiration from Hautea et al.'s (2021) use of multimodal analysis (Ledin & Machin, 2020). Multimodal analysis is a form of content analysis that examines the interaction of different modes of communication and encourages analysis, ranging from micro-level audiovisual production decisions (e.g., camera movement, font choice, sound effects) to the overall narrative effect of the piece and its intertextual references (Ledin & Machin, 2020).

I watched all the videos and inductively built a codebook based on emergent trends, rewatching the videos repeatedly until no additional themes could be discerned. I tracked descriptive criteria such as "contains a Duet/Stitch" and more ambiguous codes like "exhibited an individualistic/systemic theory of change." Although I initially set out to quantify the presence of all codes, this proved both methodologically infeasible and analytically unhelpful. This choice acknowledges a methodological limitation of this study. Because I did not have a second coder to validate the quantity of codes, I continued to quantify only the most descriptive criteria (e.g., video has problems with formatting affecting its legibility; includes a verbal/thumbnail/textual timestamp; references outside sources via hyperlink/verbally; includes repurposed/imitative content; is a repost-only . . . ), while using the codebook to guide a richer discursive analysis of more ambiguous themes.

All videos were watched and analyzed at least twice, and the top 20 most-played videos from each sample were subjected to extra analysis. For particularly popular accounts, such as the news organizations in the Soupgate sample, I also analyzed the contents of their profile pages for additional details, such as the account's biography text, and collected any external links. This allowed me to understand the level of intertextuality at play, as multimodal analysis recommends.

In addition to mapping the ecology of environmental communication, my goal was to identify "frictions" (Tomalin, 2023) in the platform's design, insofar as these frictions manifest in the content. I relied on other studies that performed thorough "walkthroughs" to describe TikTok's affordances, patterns of use, and limitations (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Hendrickx, 2024; Kaye et al., 2020; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). For instance, Zulli and Zulli (2022) emphasized design frictions that made TikTok difficult to use for social networking, reorienting users around content rather than around other users (p. 1878). To avoid focusing too much on studying the platform's technical affordances to answer sociocultural questions, as Duguay and Gold-Apel (2023) caution against, the decision to use multimodal analysis rather than the walkthrough method enabled me to focus on how these affordances manifested in the content.

### **Sociotechnical Frictions and How to Overcome Them**

In the sections that follow, I elaborate on four sources of designed friction on TikTok: its vertical video norm, lack of timestamp support, forbidden hyperlinks, and algorithmic prioritization of imitable content (summarized in Table 2). Platform designers often try to eliminate frictions, but Tomalin, 2023 points out that many frictions are purposeful, meant to shape the behaviors and uses that platforms want their users to adopt. In each of these cases, these frictions appear to slow or stifle the creation or circulation

of environmental news communication in various ways. "Friction" as a conceptual framework is an important addition to the "affordances" literature because, unlike many works that discuss platform affordances as impenetrable barriers, users can overcome frictions. For each example of friction, I will also show how various creators overcame this friction through multimodal, ad hoc "workarounds."

These workarounds are not without consequences. In the first three examples, creators had to make small sacrifices, adjusting their journalistic practices to meet the platform's requirements. I conclude this section with a more detailed account of a fourth, more consequential sociotechnical friction: not all content can easily align with TikTok's algorithmized trends, and breaking news content is especially difficult to conform to the platform's sociotechnical expectation that content is always "in conversation" with other content and creators on the network. However, creators worked around this expectation by starting a new conversation entirely: News channels posted breaking news content as promptly and with as little context as possible, positioning their videos to become the origin of downstream imitations, which appeared to fuel imitative anti-environmental videos.

**Table 2. Frictions, Workarounds, and Costs of Workarounds.**

<b>Friction</b>	<b>Consequence(s) for viewers if creator does not work around the friction</b>	<b>Workaround(s)</b>	<b>Cost(s) of using workaround borne by creator</b>
<b>1</b> Vertical video norm discourages horizontal video from being posted	Horizontal videos often misfitted to the platform, potentially affecting legibility.	Creators must append black bars to the top/bottom of horizontal video; or crop the sides off the video to fit in vertical orientation.	Extra effort needed to "version" video for TikTok aspect ratio; videos may still be misfitted to platform.
<b>2</b> No time/date stamps	Viewers may be shown outdated information, potentially misinforming them.	Creators must verbally state the date they posted their video; or place the date in the thumbnail or description.	Creators must sacrifice thumbnail or description real estate for a manual timestamp.
<b>3</b> Hyperlinks are forbidden, with few exceptions	Viewers cannot follow links to relevant external sites (e.g., sources for claims).	Creators can verbally cite sources; or embed them within the video (e.g., a screenshot or a nonclickable link); or use a custom LinkTree service.	Verbally cited sources may be difficult for viewers to trace; embedded links are not clickable; LinkTree services can be expensive and labor intensive to maintain.
<b>4</b> Recommendation algorithm prioritizes content that begets further remixing and imitation (see Zulli & Zulli, 2022).	News stories are often not imitable in the same way other TikTok content is, so viewers are less likely to be recommended news content.	News stories must be made more imitable, which could be achieved by retaining only the most imitable parts of the video; or expending more time and effort to conform news content to TikTok's vernacular.	Including important context to the news event, citing sources, and other journalistic norms, etc. may reduce video's imitateness; news content needs to be specifically produced for TikTok's platform vernacular, rather than being recycled from elsewhere.

### **Friction 1: Versioning for Vertical Video**

TikTok's vertical video format is perhaps its most obvious content limitation, yet it is frequently disregarded, especially by news organizations. This causes incompatibility with production processes where

horizontal video is the norm, like television and YouTube, and means that horizontal media need to be "versioned" (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2016) by recutting or reshooting it to appear "native" to TikTok. This technical affordance incentivizes creators to post original content recorded in vertical format (most naturally on a smartphone), rather than repost content from other sources shot horizontally. This complicates the production process for organizations that distribute their content to many media channels. In a sizeable portion of content posted by news accounts in this study, artifacts of off-platform production processes were evident.

In the IRA sample, news organizations frequently posted videos that were poorly edited for TikTok or clearly reposted from other media sources without significant versioning. Nine percent of videos posted by news accounts in the IRA sample contained formatting issues that impeded their legibility. For example, a video posted by CBS Mornings placed the headline text "Inflation Reduction Act" half off-screen at several points, making it mostly unreadable (CBS Mornings, 2022). Twenty-three percent were reposts of horizontal news videos, possibly intended for television or platforms like YouTube or Facebook. One video by Sky News, for example, was a horizontal news feed reposted from television, abutted on top and bottom by huge white bars (Sky News, 2022). This is perhaps less impactful than the CBS Mornings (2022) error, since all the information remained intact, but it still contrasts sharply with the "native" videos posted by influencers and ordinary users who fully leveraged TikTok's creative tools. Influencer videos typically featured visual hallmarks of smartphone video, such as camera switches between front- and rear-facing views, digital zoom, or filters that are only possible with the TikTok app. It may appear to be a simple technical problem with a simple solution, but it is clearly a point of friction, especially for news organizations with concretized production processes.

This is also not to say that news organizations reposting content from their television sources is inherently a problem. Intertextuality is common and even rewarded on TikTok. However, videos not produced "for" TikTok challenge the vernacular of the platform's imitation publics (Zulli & Zulli, 2022) because they do not actively position themselves in relation to the conversations happening on the platform.

### ***Friction 2: Unsupported Time and Date Stamps***

From TikTok's For You page, it is not possible to see the time and date a video was posted unless the creator states it themselves. For TikTok, this omission exponentially increases the amount of content "worth engaging with," as content on other platforms older than two days is often cast aside as outdated by users (Grosser, as cited in Matsakis, 2019, para. 5). With this design, TikTok selectively filters outdated content, but leaves the door open for this content to be rediscovered in the future. Because of this, videos posted weeks or months ago can suddenly go viral. This strategy helps backfill a massive archive of "old" content ready to be remixed into fresh content. TikTok is thus designed to accommodate content spanning a wide temporality, rather than prioritizing content that is in fact new, as "the news" is. However, because the IRA wound its way through Congress over many months, updates from various stages of its development blended together in the sample. With no indication that the news in their algorithmic feeds is outdated, viewers may be misled.

Some news organizations and content creators worked around this design limitation by manually captioning the thumbnail of their videos with the date, as freelance journalist V. Spehar, known for running the account UnderTheDeskNews, did in their coverage of the IRA (see UnderTheDeskNews, 2022). Other videos included timestamps in their descriptions. Both workarounds are multimodal solutions, as they leverage alternative affordances (thumbnails and video descriptions). Both workarounds require creators to sacrifice valuable thumbnail and description real estate. For viewers, manual timestamping is an imperfect solution, as it is visible only on the Search and Creator pages, not the For You page. Moreover, TikTok offers no way to sort or filter videos by recency on the Search or For You page. This technical limitation introduces friction for creators producing news content and for viewers alike—yet another design choice that disadvantages news content, regardless of who created it.

Perhaps more consequentially, this illustrates how a platform can be designed to support certain temporalities over others. In practice, TikTok still recommends timely videos, but its mechanism for sensing timeliness may rely more on relevance to algorithmized trends than strictly on recency.

### ***Friction 3: Forbidden Hyperlinks***

Unlike many other social media sites, TikTok does not support hyperlinks to off-platform sources within videos, descriptions, or comments. Hyperlinks are automatically removed when posted, permitting just one dedicated button on the creator's biography page. Creators who want to cite their sources or link to further information resort to several ad-hoc solutions. Some creators embed the information directly into the video through screenshots; some verbally cite the source, occasionally with detailed directions to access it; and others direct viewers to their "link in bio." Critically, however, many do not provide an actionable source for their information at all.

Some creators embed screenshots directly into their videos. Embedded screenshots are as simple as weather forecasts pasted in numerous videos in the Heat Dome sample or as elaborate as lengthy excerpts from policy documents, as a few of the influencer-produced and news-produced videos in the IRA sample used—a sourcing practice more reminiscent of rigorous traditional journalism.

Verbal citations are also common, especially among ordinary creators and influencers, who use them twice as often as news organizations. Verbal references direct viewers to off-platform sources without providing a clickable link. For example, one influencer in the Heat Dome sample described to viewers how to access her blog, where she had posted tips on keeping pets cool without air conditioning.

Many news and influencers in the study used an expansion service, such as LinkTree or Linkin.bio. "Link-in-bios" are simple websites that contain a customizable list of hyperlinks, which help creators to get around TikTok's single link allowance. Link-in-bios work around this restriction imposed by TikTok, but for citation and verification, it is far from a perfect solution. Viewers need to navigate to the creator's bio page, click their link-in-bio, and then hunt through a list of options to find the relevant source. Maintaining link-in-bio systems requires effort and can cost money.

Even for the top news accounts appearing in the study, only one used a link-in-bio that appeared to contain up-to-date sources for the many news stories they had recently posted. The majority appeared to be infrequently updated or even abandoned. Yahoo!’s and NowThis’s biographies linked only to their homepages or to newsletter signups. Itvnews, the seventh most-followed account in the entire study, used its link-in-bio system to promote a story that was four months old at the time of data collection. Sky News, on the other hand, used an advanced link-in-bio system to provide additional context and links to text stories on nearly all the videos they posted to their TikTok account. This level of sourcing was rare among the news accounts in this study. Like the other frictions and workarounds discussed thus far, the responsibility for doing “good journalism” was once again displaced entirely to the individual creator, left unassisted by the platform. The diversity and multimodality of workarounds to this particular friction also spoke to the ingenuity and persistence of some journalists and creators on TikTok, who have found many ways to overcome the problem despite the lack of support from the platform.

The importance of supporting claims with verifiable links should not be overstated because researchers have shown that many Internet users do not follow links to news stories even when they are provided (Gabelkov et al., 2016). However, citing sources is more than good journalistic practice: For content creators seeking legitimization, citing sources builds personal brand credibility. Even if viewers do not follow the links to their sources, the citation itself lends news-like legitimacy to these creators. However, the overall dearth of biography links suggests that few accounts have successfully used them to convert TikTok views into web traffic. For influencers, who make their money through multiple sources like brand deals, adshare revenue, and donations (Glatt, 2022; Poell et al., 2021), this may be tolerable. However, for news organizations that benefit from traffic funneled to their websites (Petre, 2015; Poell et al., 2021), this may be an existential issue.

#### ***Friction 4: Appealing to Algorithmized Trends (and the Unintended Consequences of Circumvention)***

The workarounds described thus far have small, predictable consequences; for instance, correctly versioning a video requires time and effort, while manually timestamping videos consumes thumbnail real estate. However, some workarounds can negatively affect the environmental news ecology itself. This section provides one example of what happened when news organizations found a way to work against both technical frictions and platform vernaculars.

In the Soupgate sample, news accounts impressively—and perhaps unexpectedly—topped the charts, averaging nearly twice the plays of influencer accounts and quadrupling the views of nonnews accounts. This is in contrast to the Heat Dome sample, in which videos posted by news accounts attracted only a small fraction of the total plays. At first glance, this seemed to be progress for news organizations on TikTok, who celebrate when their stories are successful online (Petre, 2015), but qualitative analysis suggests this particular success came at the cost of journalistic standards. Of the 10 most-played videos in this sample, six—all from established news organizations—were merely reposts of the original protest clip, with little to no context or details about the breaking story.

Novara Media, a UK-based left-wing digital news organization, was the first to post the video. Being the first mover, their video received more plays than any other, despite the news organization having fewer followers than larger organizations in the sample. NowThis, Yahoo!, The Guardian, and other news organizations also posted raw footage of the protest within hours, with minimal context or additional reporting. At most, they captioned the video with basic headlines. Yahoo! News, for example, added only the caption "Climate activists vandalize \$84.2M Van Gogh painting" to the reposted footage (Yahoo! News, 2022), omitting important details, like the protestors' affiliation with activist group JustStopOil or the fact that the painting was undamaged.

How can the high number of plays be explained? Looking at the remaining 10 most-played videos lends a clue: they were entirely Duets and Stitches posted by ordinary users and influencers who remixed the raw footage of the protest provided by the news organizations. Building from and remixing the raw footage, three influencers argued about leftist environmental protestors destroying valuable artwork. Elsewhere in this case study, other creators were less worried about the politics of the protest and instead sidestepped the protest entirely by turning a background character shouting for "security!" into a soundbite of its own. This sound was lifted from the original video by one creator, and many more creators began lip-syncing to the sound. Some lip-sync videos used the Duet feature, which played their rendition alongside the original video of the protest. Most of these lip-syncs, however, detached themselves from the original video so that a viewer who had not seen the original would not know the origin of the sound. This could be taken as an innocuous subversion of the protestors' anti-fossil fuels message—turning a background character into an inside joke and sidestepping a difficult discussion about fossil fuels. On the other hand, the algorithmic infrastructure of TikTok rewards videos that participate in trends, and these subversive videos may have sparked a feedback loop that contributed to the original video's popularity. The rewards are big, in terms of visibility, for creators who spark new trends—so much so that politically key elements of environmental discourse may be cut free from their meaning and turned into apolitical phenomena of their own.

The news organizations received a high number of plays because their raw footage of the protest was a blank canvas that other creators creatively remixed, built on, and played off, thereby engaging TikTok's sociotechnical infrastructure, which rewards participation in its algorithmized trends. Yet, the popularity of these derivative videos further distanced the protest from its original context as a breaking environmental news story. Through imitation, news organizations and creators metaphorically disarmed the protestors while simultaneously boosting engagement for news organizations.

TikTok has built a platform that both technically and socially rewards content that begets more content. Content that does not engage existing content or lend itself to future pastiche holds less value for the platform. To work around this friction, news organizations shortcut the effort necessary to adapt their content to TikTok's vernacular, while still garnering many views. The recommendation algorithm may recognize sociopolitical valence, but its chief priority here appeared to be to surface and construct highly imitable content. Imitation was the dominant logic.

### **Working With the Imitation Logic: Toward a Healthier (News Media) Ecology**

Despite all this, it is possible for expert news and climate communicators to build an audience on TikTok while maintaining their journalistic values and communicative efficacy. One news organization that attempted to bridge this gap was the *Washington Post*, which had three videos in the IRA sample (although none in the Soupgate or Heat Dome samples). At the time, WaPo employed a small team of influencer-like journalists who translated stories from the newspaper’s front page to the TikTok audience. Their page was highly successful, garnering nearly 2 million followers since they joined the platform in 2019. WaPo’s “TikTok Guy” (Karten, 2024, para. 5), Dave Jorgenson, attributed their success to their effort to make news “look and feel like the other content on TikTok and have the same tone” (para. 11), indicating his belief in the importance of understanding the platform vernacular.

Most news organizations have not built their production processes around the practices and aesthetics of authenticity that pervade TikTok’s vernacular (Hund, 2023; Poell et al., 2021, pp. 152–153). WaPo’s success on TikTok illustrates the significant amount of time and effort that journalists need to spend working with (and against) the technical affordances and platform vernaculars. Their approach is one of the few that appears to understand the platform vernacular and its technical affordances, and it seems they have been rewarded with a sizeable audience. Despite this, it remains unclear whether the endeavor is “worth it” for the newspaper’s long-term business strategy.

A rising cast of independent, influencer-like citizen journalists was also captured in the IRA sample. UnderTheDeskNews, run by TikTok creator V. Spehar, was one of WaPo’s biggest competitors in the IRA sample (see UnderTheDeskNews, 2022). Spehar covered the IRA from their usual news station under their home office desk, and in their trademark casual tone. Like other influencers on the platform, Spehar used TikTok’s special effects and imitation tools and frequently engaged with their audience in the comments section. Independent TikTok news creators are increasingly validated as influential news distributors by governments and politicians (Edwards, 2023), supporting the idea that legacy news needs to adapt to TikTok, rather than expecting TikTok to cater to their production processes.

For legacy news journalists, and perhaps even trained climate communicators like meteorologists, ENGOs, government agencies, and academics, the effort needed to create content for the TikTok vernacular is high. Even if they have production skills in other media, as television meteorologists do, for instance, this knowledge must be adapted to the sociotechnical logics of TikTok. This high barrier to entry may explain one particularly disappointing result: Only four videos were posted by ENGOs across all case studies. This contrasts with the popular conceptualization of TikTok as a platform for “democratizing” content creation, affirming Pilati et al.’s (2025) recent argument.

One solution to the incompatibilities detailed in this article—which is easier said than done—lies in changing the very design of TikTok. However, in lieu of this, creators (and especially established news organizations with greater resources) should assess their fluency in the imitative vernacular of TikTok. Working around the platform’s imitation logic, rather than working with it, may lead to negative consequences for the news media ecology.

### Conclusion

As a platform, TikTok appears to favor content that aligns with its imitation logic by engaging its algorithm through trending sounds, effects, and topics. Its imitation logic is inscribed both technically through design frictions and socially through the platform vernacular. This imitation logic alone does not necessarily disadvantage environmental news content. Environmental content can be symbiotic with the rest of the platform vernacular with more effort, as the freelance news influencers and the *Washington Post* journalists covering the IRA showed. In practice, however, this appears to incentivize shortcuts to popularity. As observed in the Soupgate case, news organizations garnered millions of views by reposting raw footage of the protest without the necessary context, which other creators used as a blank slate to produce more subversive content. Creators are further disincentivized to practice traditional journalistic values because the platform has little technical infrastructure to do so.

Technology can be designed to afford only certain patterns of use, consequently reinforcing structures of power. While TikTok has not explicitly voiced distaste or barred news content altogether, as some other platforms have, the effect produced by the design of their platform is similar: News is posted, but the platform affords few features to support respected journalistic standards or analytical seriousness and rigor. Creators who are still interested in upholding those standards worked around these technical limitations, but with mixed and sometimes unpredictable effects. As a result, environmental news content in the three case studies may not have been as effective at conveying the severity of the climate crisis or its systemic causes as it could have been.

However, attributing this deficiency solely to TikTok's technical affordances underestimates users' power to shape the content and social practices that a platform is or is not "for." The range of uses any platform supports is socially negotiated by its users, rather than being wholly determined by its technical infrastructure (Duguay, 2020; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015; Nagy & Neff, 2015). TikTok's platform vernacular should be considered a counterpart to its technical affordances, each emphasizing participation and imitation over all else. The "workarounds" I detailed illustrate this agency, highlighting the possibility of a user-driven movement toward more rigorous journalistic and social norms. Maybe TikTok's developers will notice the need for better journalistic tools and deploy them. But if not, there is a silver lining in the evidence that certain users have figured out how to work around the frictions that make effective journalism and climate communication difficult.

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