

The New Tactics of TikTok Journalism: Viral Explainers, Trends and News Formats from 10 Newsrooms

Ten news organizations are testing TikTok-native strategies, from viral explainers to trend-based storytelling, raising questions about the future of journalism.

KAIA TRAN

In 2022, when news broke that a Milwaukee high school principal had strip-searched female students looking for vape devices without notifying parents, Brooke Eberle at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel saw an opportunity. While other local outlets published traditional articles, Eberle recognized that the story's primary victims — high school students — weren't reading newspapers. They were on TikTok.

Eberle made a three-part TikTok [video](#) series explaining the principal's actions and the ensuing court proceedings. And her gamble paid off spectacularly. One of them reached 850,000 viewers — dwarfing the reach of the original print coverage. High schoolers and parents flooded the comments with their own experiences of invasive school policies, turning a local news story into a nationwide conversation about student rights.

"That was the most viral," Eberle recalls. The success revealed something traditional newsrooms are still learning: There's a large audience on TikTok ready to engage. To explore how news organizations are using TikTok, I spoke with 11 journalists and content creators behind the TikTok accounts at national outlets, city papers, and one issue-driven newsroom.

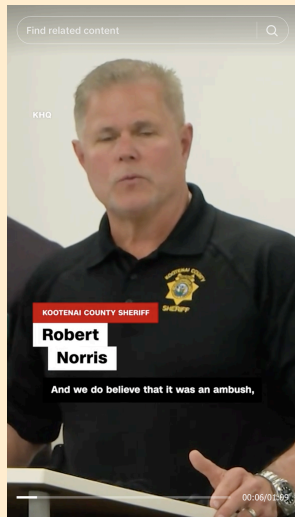
This research, part of my master's work at the University of Missouri's School of Journalism, dives into the strategies these

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organizations use to create content that speaks the language of TikTok. The findings suggest that success on TikTok may hinge less on traditional newsroom experience and more on creators' abilities to adapt to the platform's culture.

Rather than simply republishing stories on the app, many newsrooms are now producing reporting designed specifically for the platform. This emerging practice is what I call *platform-specific journalism*, or more precisely, *TikTok journalism*. TikTok journalism requires more than just journalistic skill, it demands fluency in TikTok's fast-paced, trend-driven, and highly visual ecosystem.

In this article, you'll learn how journalists are rethinking story formats, editing styles, audience engagement, and journalistic integrity to connect with audiences on TikTok



The same CNN news story on TikTok format (left, 9:16 ratio) and Youtube format (right, 16:9 ratio).

TikTok Basics

TikTok as we know it today launched in the United States in August 2018 when it merged with the Musical.ly app.

TikTok is the fastest-growing social and video network, according to the [Digital News Report 2025](#) from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

As of 2025, TikTok has 1.59 billion monthly active users worldwide. Users spend a collective 4.8 billion minutes on the platform daily.

- **Vertical video format (9:16 aspect ratio for mobile)**
- **15 seconds to 10 minute videos (60 minutes if uploaded)**
- **Trending challenges, sounds, on-screen captions and face filters**
- **Algorithmic discovery (Recommendations on the “For You” page):** TikTok never shows two videos in a row made with the same audio or by the same creator.
- **Interactive tools** like duets, stitches, polls, and Q&A
- **Personality-driven:** Creators often speak directly to the camera.
- **Low barriers to entry:** A creator’s video can go viral even if they don’t have a large following.

Why TikTok Matters for News

Reaching younger audiences is the main reason newsrooms said they produce video for TikTok. CNN Former Vice President for Digital Video Jacquie Smith cited "a very large audience on those social platforms that we're not reaching," while Tom Carroll said the Los Angeles Times joined to "meet young people where their eyeballs are" after recognizing that their subscriber base skews older.

[Combating news avoidance. The Reuters Institute's 2024 Digital News Report](#)

shows that audiences are increasingly turning away from news, especially young people and women. Meanwhile, usage of TikTok has grown dramatically.

Brand recognition and trust-building.

Mandy Velez Tatti who used to work for *The Daily Beast* and now for *TeenVogue* noted both outlets "want to be where readers are for brand recognition."

Personal branding. Chris Vazquez, formerly of the Washington Post, saw followers migrate with him to The Marshall Project when he changed jobs, demonstrating how individual journalists can build audiences that transcend institutional boundaries.

Accessibility. At the Marshall Project, which has many readers who are incarcerated and have low literacy rates, Vazquez explained that "video storytelling would be better to reach people who might not be able to read thousands of words of investigative journalism."

Monetization opportunities. TikTok offers opportunities for creators to make money through affiliate marketing and sponsored content. Mandy Velez Tatti, associate director of audience development and analytics for *TeenVogue*, said the magazine experiments with live streaming and offering subscription-content revenue streams.

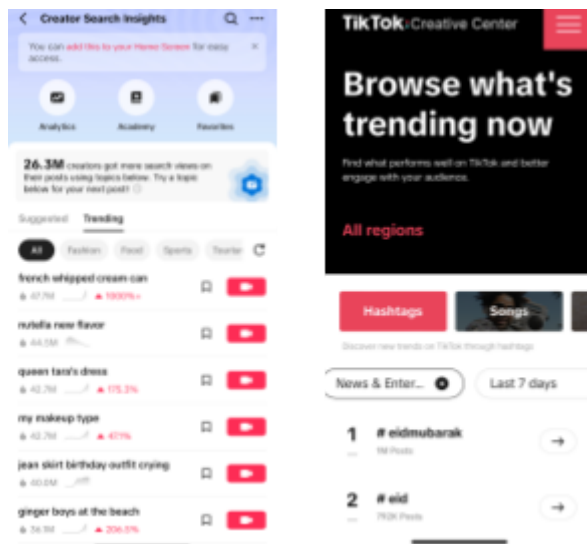
Combating misinformation drives newsrooms like CNN to provide "accurate factual" information where young people increasingly consume news, Smith shared.

A TikTok caveat for newsrooms. News organizations should view TikTok as a brand awareness and audience development tool rather than a direct web traffic generator. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's deputy editor for audience, Lainey Seyler, reports unsuccessful referral attempts, noting users "strongly prefer to remain within the app's ecosystem." Dallas Morning News Audience Editor Shannon Worley cited structural limitations: "You can't add a link on videos and in captions."

TikTok Creation Tactics

Find Your Topic

News organizations employ content-selecting strategies based on their coverage areas and breadth of available reporting and multimedia assets. National outlets CNN and USA Today select stories with compelling visuals and impactful sound bites from the hundreds of daily breaking news clips they publish daily. Those outlets often select topics for TikTok that they have found resonate with younger audiences, such as pieces on climate change, gender equality, abortion rights, gun control, and health care.



Left: Creator Search Insights can be accessed by Search in the TikTok app.

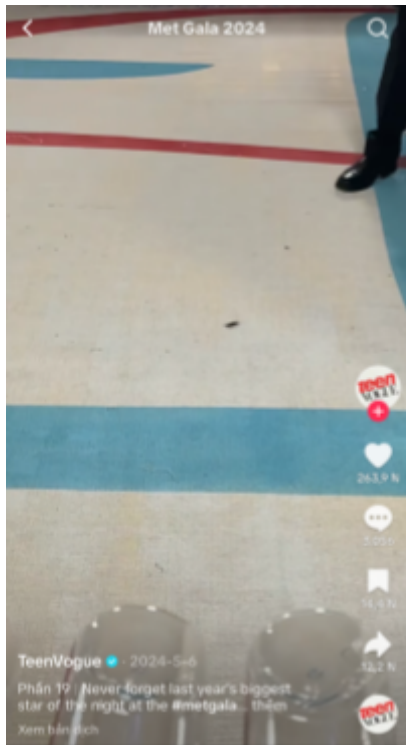
Right: The TikTok Creative Center on the TikTok for Business website.

Metro outlets The Dallas Morning News and Denver Post emphasize human interest stories involving high school and college students and supplement them

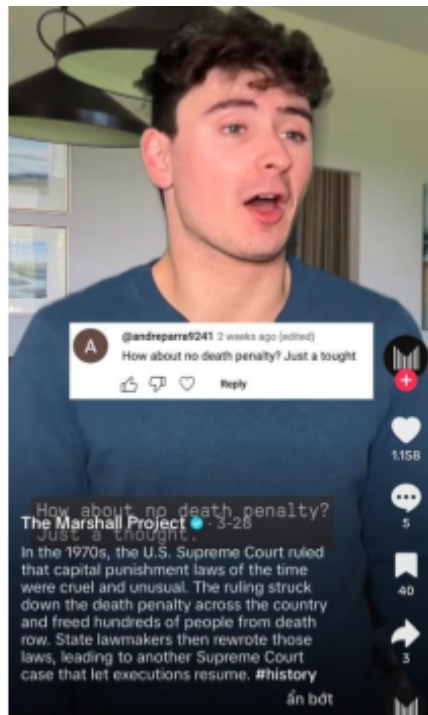
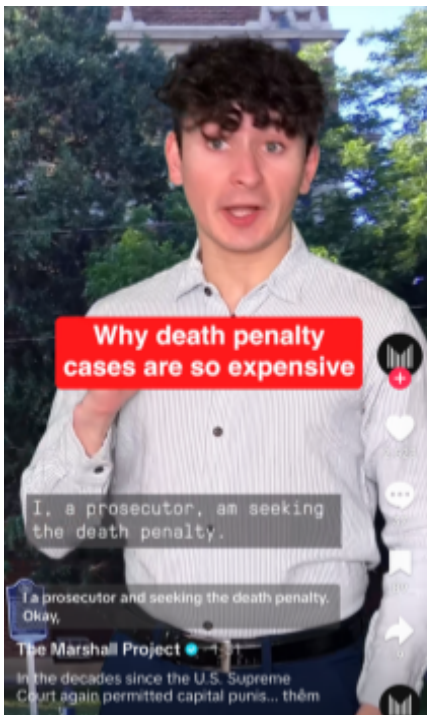
with videos on trending regional topics identified by SEO analysis and Google Analytics. The Dallas Morning News' Shannon Worley notes TikTok's emergence as a search engine rival to Google that provides valuable insights into trending hashtags and topics worthy of coverage. The removal of the Discovery Button from the TikTok app has changed the discoverability dramatically. Currently, creators can search trending video, sound and hashtags with TikTok Creative Center and Creator Search Insights. Newsrooms can leverage this information on TikTok trends to inform their content priorities and coverage decisions.

Some specialized publications find success with evergreen topics. The Marshall Project's death penalty coverage consistently performs well and regains virality when death penalty cases are in the news. TeenVogue focuses on celebrity interviews and red-carpet fashion.

Authentic, raw moments often outperform polished content. TeenVogue's one of most-viewed videos featured a cockroach stealing the spotlight at the 2024 Met Gala, demonstrating viewers' preference for spontaneous, unscripted moments. Success requires understanding which aspects of your newsroom's coverage might resonate with TikTok users and maintaining readiness to capture unexpected on-scene moments that resonate with viewers.



TeenVogue captured the viral moments of a bug appearing on the Met Gala 2024 red carpet and a Pop Mart Christmas gift box unboxing.

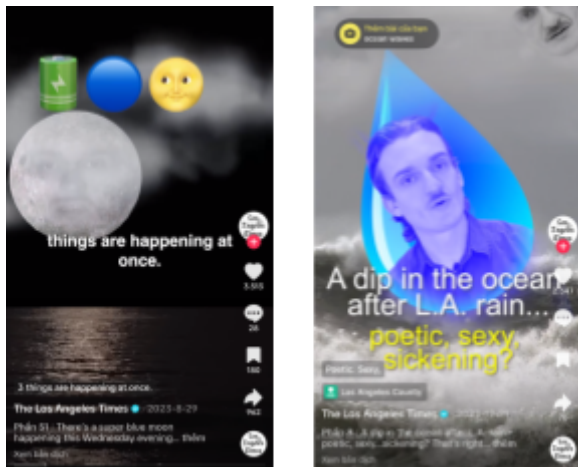


The Marshall Project's evergreen death penalty explainer videos.

Story Format

News organizations employ three distinct content formats on TikTok:

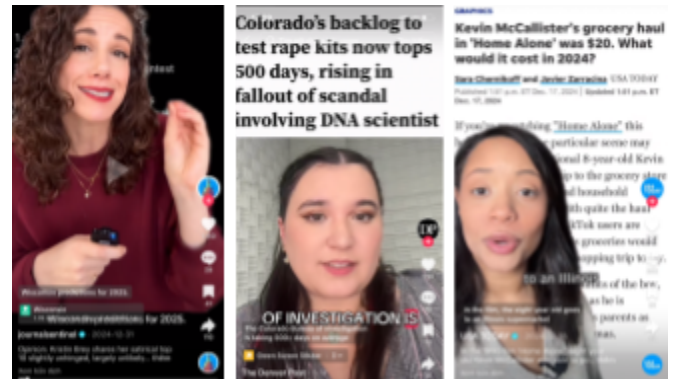
- **The creator-first approach:** characterized by the use of viral challenges and memes, text overlaying appealing visuals and strategic hashtagging to maximize discoverability. This approach represents a significant departure from conventional news presentation and is specifically designed to appeal to younger generations. (For example, The Los Angeles Times has used face filters to humanize scientific concepts.)



The Los Angeles Times mimicked the trending eyes and mouth filter on TikTok with their own custom elements.

- **The newsroom-led strategy:** favored by broadcast outlets that repurpose existing TV content. For example, CNN converts 70% of

their TikTok content from television packages.



The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, The Denver Post, and USA Today use the news-explainer format to explain original stories published on their websites.

- **The news explainer format:** mainly used by text-based outlets that don't produce much original video content. News explainer videos add commentary and analysis over article screenshots or third-party footage to create a new storytelling format.

News explainer videos can be hosted by a variety of people — from correspondents reporting from the scene to bylined reporters or content creators who distill key information from original stories. Some news organizations have expanded beyond traditional hosting approaches. Seyler from The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel described leveraging established influencers such as comedian Kristen Brey or former Green Bay Packers player Leroy Butler to host their TikTok content. This

has helped her news organization “boost reputations and gain followers” among young people during the critical early stages of building its TikTok presence.

The Los Angeles Times took an unconventional approach by employing puppets as hosts to enhance the entertainment value of their videos. The organization hired Safi Nazzal to bring his professional puppeteering experience to their videos. Nazzal said that puppet hosts “allow you to get away with being

more playful,” noting they’re particularly effective for lighter stories while also serving a deeper purpose. “Puppets can diffuse scary situations. They can break down judgments and prejudices,” Nazzal said.

These different approaches to hosting videos illustrate the first step of how news publishers are strategically varying from traditional journalistic presentation to adapt to TikTok’s entertainment-driven environment.



The Los Angeles Times has used puppets to host some of their TikTok videos.



Screenshots of videos using multiple personas to role-play different perspectives by The Marshall Project.

Story Structure

Successful TikTok news videos require specialized storytelling techniques optimized for the platform's algorithm, which prioritizes videos under 60 seconds with compelling opening hooks. To capture attention within the crucial first three seconds, news organizations can front-load key information like surprising statistics, captivating questions, or intriguing ambient sound. These opening hooks often work well with

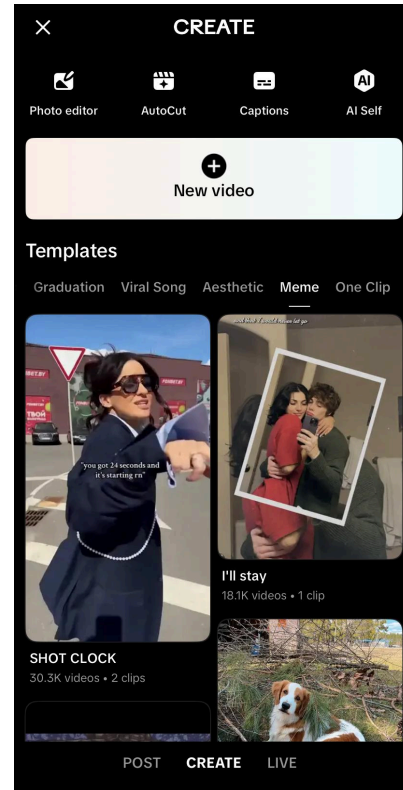
specific narrative structures. For example, loop-and-flashback narratives that begin with dynamic moments before providing context; character-driven explanations using multiple personas to role-play different perspectives; and on-location filming, added with some appealing visual elements that help audiences connect with where stories unfold, ultimately balancing TikTok's demand for immediate engagement with journalism's essential function to inform and contextualize.

Producing video with TikTok's in-app tools

News organizations on TikTok achieve significantly higher engagement when they adopt platform-native storytelling techniques rather than simply repurposing broadcast content, according to "Let's dance the news! How the news media are adapting to the logic of TikTok" by Vázquez-Herrero et al. (2022). Advocates argue that TikTok's in-app tools offer efficiency and authenticity — The Denver Post's Brooke Eberle appreciates their simplicity. "I can do everything from my phone and it can be really quick," Eberle said.

The social team at TeenVogue uses in-app captions, hashtags and slideshow carousels as the producer believes that they can make the video as native to the platform as possible. According to TikTok, its algorithm tends to promote content created entirely within the app over videos edited with external software. This approach also helps news organizations avoid producing content that looks too polished for TikTok's casual, authentic culture.

However, other interviewees cite significant concerns with the in-app tools: copyright uncertainties with TikTok's music library, mobile editing difficulties, automatic caption inconsistencies, and potential credibility damage from trendy filters.

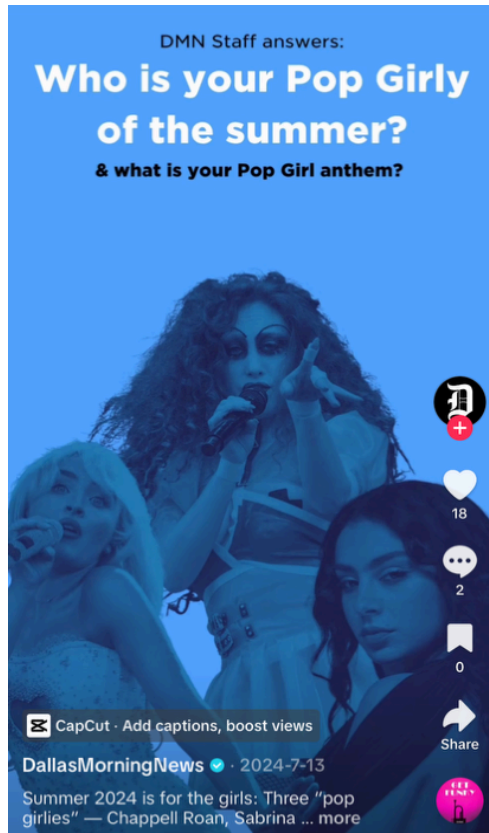


TikTok in-app tools for adding sounds, captions, customizing length, editing photo/video with templates/filters, autocut, and AI editing.

CNN's Jacque Smith emphasizes the balance. "We have to walk a line between being engaging and maintaining our reputation," Smith said. "The bells and whistles and all the shiny things distract from the content, sometimes more than it helps."

Most newsrooms adopt hybrid approaches, developing their own elements and filters in professional video editing software that mimic TikTok's aesthetic while selectively using native features.

Trends



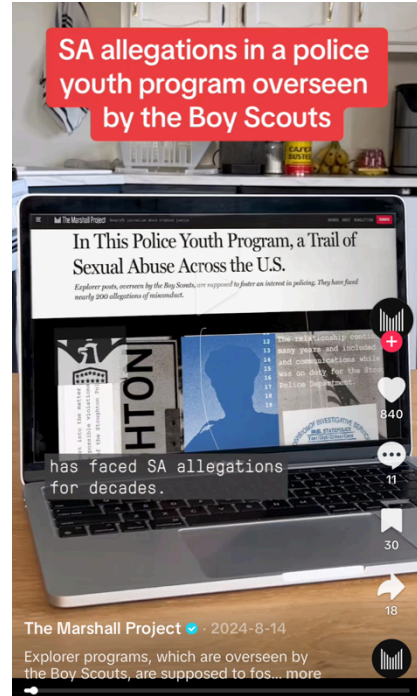
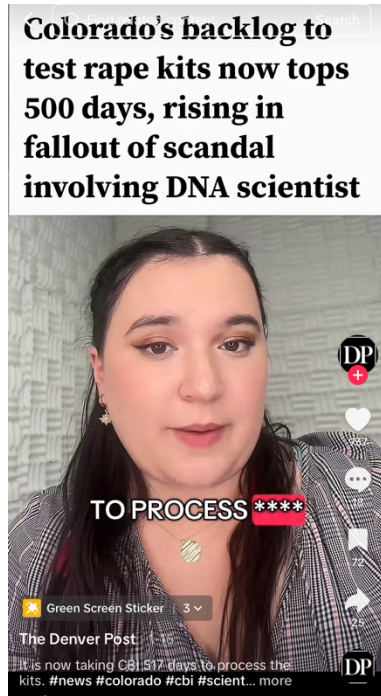
The Dallas Morning News participated in the "Pop Princess" trend.

Trends are a defining characteristic of the TikTok platform, shaping what people create, share, search, and engage with on the platform. However, those interviewed for this study recommended a nuanced approach to trends, challenges and filters to balance between journalistic standards and entertaining characteristics. For example, trending question-based formats have proven particularly

adaptable. At The Dallas Morning News, Worley adapted the "Who is your pop princess?" trend by asking reporters to share which pop star they consider their personal pop princess. The video sparked lively engagement in the comments, with viewers enthusiastically agreeing with or debating the choices. The Denver Post generated engagement with video of food reporters attempting viral food-testing challenges.

Hashtag tactics

Shannon Worley from The Dallas Morning News recommended focused captions with approximately five relevant topic and location tags. People often use search to find videos on TikTok and successful hashtags from competing news outlets can be replicated. TikTok's slideshow feature offers particular value for photo-heavy newsrooms, allowing photo stories to be transformed into video content without extensive resources. News organizations can make their brand consistent on TikTok by implementing templated color schemes, logo placement and typography. Branding can preserve brand identity even when videos are screen-recorded or reshared across other platforms.



The Denver Post and The Marshall Project, using asterisks and algospeak to replace sensitive words.

Navigating TikTok’s Community Guidelines

TikTok has many community principles. Violating these guidelines can lead to video suppression, takedowns or account suspension.

Audio Library

Background music choices that complement story themes can increase engagement. For instance, using tracks like Dolly Parton's "9 to 5" for workplace stories creates thematic resonance and improves algorithmic visibility. However, professionals should mind copyright uncertainties — using library music that is not fully licensed for commercial use can

result in a video being muted. Social producers should consult their newsroom’s legal adviser before using any sounds from TikTok’s library.

Captioning

TikTok's content moderation algorithms create significant challenges when using captions. TikTok applies strict censorship around sensitive topics, including mentions of LGBTQ+ terminology, crime and death. So, Eberle said she normally put in asterisks to replace sensitive words like “rape” or “sex.” The Marshall Project’s Chris Vazquez employs “algospeak” — coded language that circumvents content moderation while preserving meaning to avoid getting their posts

removed or down-ranked by platforms. Examples include substituting "unalive" for "dead" or "SA" for "sexual assault."

Research by Klug et al. (2023) confirms that strategic algospeak can improve visibility for important but potentially suppressed content. Klug gathered examples for reference.

How to measure success

Video views are the most common metric for tracking TikTok performance, though expectations vary significantly across organizations. Some legacy outlets consider 100,000 views per video a respectable benchmark, while local news organizations like the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel set a lower goal at around 20,000 views. However, many professionals acknowledge TikTok's inherently unpredictable nature. As Seyler describes it, the platform "can be like feast or famine...You can go to a million views really quick...and the next step you will never know what's gonna happen with your video."

The Los Angeles Times' Tom Carroll values interaction metrics. "Sometimes it's easier to get views than it is to get shares and comments," Carroll said. "Shares and comments, I think, are more valuable metrics than just straight views." This perspective reflects an understanding that, while viral reach matters, sustained engagement and audience action

ultimately deliver more meaningful long-term value for news organizations.

Comment sections serve as valuable sourcing tools for finding human sources and story tips, though most newsrooms advise against active comment engagement due to the potential for toxic comments that might affect the wellbeing of their journalists.

Social team structure and hiring

The news organizations interviewed for this report typically structure their digital content teams with five or six producers managing the complete production cycle from story discovery to publication. Newsrooms organized their social video teams by either platform (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube), project (elections, crime, wildfires), beat (politics, culture, food) or function (separating video production from social media strategy). However, most newsrooms now avoid platform-specific teams in favor of a cross-platform approach. The Dallas Morning News' Worley noted her team switched to a "everyone is able to do everything" approach. The team creates videos for YouTube Shorts, Instagram Reels and TikTok.

Young journalists play a crucial role in these social video teams. The Marshall Project's Chris Vazquez emphasized that these professionals can "use the visual storytelling format that they've had

success with in the past, condense an article in a way that they know it will be successful but also aligns with the

organization's ethics and values," advising newsrooms to simply "let the creators cook."

Is There a Future for Short-Form Video News?

In 2015's notorious pivot-to-video, Facebook used artificial metrics — inflated video engagement data counting 3-second clips as full views — to lure news organizations to invest heavily in video. Many news organizations burned through their resources for what in the end amounted to little audience engagement or return on investment. This current move toward short-form video journalism appears more sustainable and strategically sound. Aggregate data from 48 countries shows all the growth in platform news use coming from video or video-led networks. This shift reflects genuine audience behavior rather than platform manipulation.

Today's TikTok journalism movement is characterized by measured experimentation. The strategic hiring of digital natives — young journalists who understand platform dynamics — provides newsrooms with the ability to test without committing large amounts of

resources. Video efforts are less expensive this time around, with journalists using mobile or fast, low-cost apps for video editing.

However, there are challenges alongside the opportunities. Social media algorithms now greatly determine how news reaches audiences, with younger people increasingly accepting the algorithmic curation of their information diet. Publishers now face self-censorship pressures, unpredictable community standards, and algorithms that prioritize viral engagement over substantive reporting — concerns newsrooms must weigh carefully before diving into short-form video.

The future of news on TikTok won't be determined by another industry-wide pivot. Instead, it will depend on individual newsrooms' capacity to thoughtfully evolve with their audiences while maintaining the transparency, verification and factual reporting that distinguishes journalism from entertainment.

	10 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS
4 Legacy News Outlets	   THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
4 Local News Outlets	milwaukee journal sentinel THE DENVER POST The Dallas Morning News Los Angeles Times
1 Magazine	teenVOGUE
1 Topic-specific Outlet	

Project Credits

The toolkit was produced by Kaia Tran based on her graduate research at the University of Missouri School of Journalism.



Kaia Tran

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