Beyond Lip-Synching:
Experimenting with TikTok Storytelling

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Abstract

This study examines using TikTok storytelling in a journalism course. The author incorporated the assignment into a multimedia course in spring 2020, requiring students to find and tell a story on deadline through the popular video-sharing application. The majority of Americans access news through social media, and news organizations regularly require applicants to be fluent in digital storytelling. Whereas existing research assesses ways of integrating Twitter, Facebook and Instagram into reporting courses, this study strives to add to that research by exploring what students learned and what other benefits and concerns they identified by integrating TikTok into journalism curricula. Overall, students reported that the experience nurtured creativity, taught them how to think and act quickly in the field, and fostered collaboration. Despite well-publicized questions about the Chinese government's influence on TikTok, few students expressed ethical concerns about journalists adding TikTok to their storytelling repertoire.

Introduction

Instagram began a decade ago, Twitter soon will be 15 years old, and Mark Zuckerberg launched Facebook at Harvard University almost 17 years ago, but no social media platform has gained as much influence – as swiftly – as TikTok, a social media application for making and sharing short videos. TikTok spawned 19-year-old Lil Nas X's song "Old Town Road" to become *Billboard*'s longest-running No. 1 hit (Frank, 2019) and enticed *The Washington Post* to begin posting humorous skits set in the newsroom (Nover, 2019). A headline from the *New York Times* epitomizes the social media application's influence: "How TikTok is Rewriting the World" (Herrman, 2019).

The social media app ranked as one of the most downloaded apps of the 2010s – outranking YouTube and Twitter – despite launching near the decade's end (*A Look Back at the Top Apps and Games of the Decade*, 2019). It also generated the most downloads for any app ever in a single quarter (Chapple, 2020). Introduced in 2016, TikTok attracted users and attention by making it easy for users to record themselves lip-synching popular songs (Asarch, 2018). Although Facebook still reigns with 255 million monthly active users in the United States and Canada (Sonnemaker, 2020), TikTok's meteoric rise shows no signs of slowing, with the app engaging more than 100 million Americans as monthly active users by mid-2020, almost 800% more than January 2018 (Sherman, 2020). Worldwide, the social media app surpassed 2 billion global downloads, making it the first app to do so outside of the Facebook family of products: Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and Facebook itself.

TikTok emerged in an environment in which so-

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cial media increasingly serve as the way Americans learn about news. By 2019, 55% of U.S. adults got news from social media "often" or "sometimes," up from 47% in 2018, according to the Pew Research Center (Shearer & Grieco, 2020). Pedagogical theorists emphasize that journalism curricula need to reflect cultural, societal, and workplace practices to prepare students for an evolving job market (Deuze, 2001). Newsrooms already are adapting. An ever-growing spreadsheet tracks news organizations and journalists producing content on TikTok, with almost 170 listed by mid-2020 (Zaffarano, 2019), and some mass communication companies seek TikTok specialists (TikTok Producer, 2020). However, the vast majority of existing research focuses on incorporating older social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook into journalism courses. This research strives to add to that body of work by exploring uses and concerns about TikTok journalistic storytelling and evaluating learning outcomes.

Literature review

For TikTok, research has focused on #challenges, in which creators make videos around a theme or attempt the same feat (Alexander, 2019), or other user-generated content. Ahlse et al. (2020) explored why Generation Z users, the biggest constituency of TikTok, participated in challenges. Mackenzie & Nichols (2020) examined whether countercultural users joined lip synching and dancing challenges in subversive ways. Others studies have looked at political content, including hate speech. For example, Medina Serrano et al. (2019) assessed how partisan users communicated with one another about political issues, and Weimann & Masri (2020) analyzed far-right extremism and hate speech found in TikTok videos. Little research looks at the burgeoning journalistic storytelling on TikTok. Only the COVID-19 pandemic inspired research into how journalists used TikTok to produce stories about health concerns (Sidorenko-Bautista et al., 2020). A dearth of research looks at incorporating TikTok into journalism and mass communications education.

For proof that producing market-ready students demands integrating social media storytelling into journalism curricula, look no further than a survey of more than 10,000 journalism and communication graduates that identified "knowing social media" at the sixth most important skill (Rosenstiel et al., 2015). A longitudinal study found that 47% of jobs posted by the top 10 newspaper and broadcast journalism companies in the United States required social media skills in 2015 and that 70% of multiplatform positions did so (Wenger, Owens and Cain, 2018). Similarly, postings for broadcast journalists frequently include social media skills (Guo & Volz, 2020).

The shift in skills sought by journalism organizations reflects the shift in where Americans seek news. In 2019, almost three in ten U.S. adults used social media as their source for news "often," according to the Pew Research Center (Shearer & Grieco, 2020), and the majority of Americans said they rely on social media to get "some" of their news. Since 2018, social media has surpassed newspapers as a news source (Shearer, 2018). Furthermore, Bocskowski et al. observed that "most young users get the news on their mobile devices as part of their constant connection to media platforms; they encounter the news all the time, rather than looking for it" (p. 1785).

Journalism education, however, has lagged behind changes in the field and struggled to adapt curricula quickly. A 2013 Poynter Institute study found that almost half (48%) of newsroom leaders and staff said journalism education isn't keeping up with changes in the field (Finberg, 2013). The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation published a report calling for a "digital-first journalism school" that would foster the skills of "self-instruction; numeracy; data analytics; human-centered, iterative design; active curiosity; and early adoption" (Lynch, 2015). The problem appears somewhat circular: Royal and Smith (2019) found a "disconnect" between the preparation of doctoral students in mass communication and what they're expected to teach, with only 39% of doctoral students and recent Ph.D. graduates agreeing with the statement "My doctoral program prepared me to teach digital topics." After overseeing the publication of *Master Class: Teaching Advice for Journalism Communication Instructors*, a book published in 2017 by the Association for Education in Journalism's standing committee on teaching, Dr. Chris Roush concluded: "Journalism and mass communication educators must learn new skills and adjust their teaching strategies to keep up with the industry's rapid evolution – or risk becoming obsolete" (Roush, 2018).

A steadily growing body of work looks at ways that mass communication programs have incorporated Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter into journalism courses. Researchers have explored live tweeting as an assignment in journalism courses (Kinsky & Bruce,

2016) or when concurrently producing stories for broadcast, print, and web audiences (Walters, 2017). One educator even introduced a "pop-up" newsroom in which students tweeted information derived from original reporting and curated content from others (Wall, 2015). Song (2016) studied ways of using Facebook as a means of collaboration among journalism students, and Wright (2017) assigned students to work in groups and cover a town hall on Facebook Live, Instagram, Periscope, Snapchat, or Twitter. Others looked at whether Instagram storytelling could be implemented into reporting courses (Byrd & Denney, 2018) or at how multimedia students assess news outlets' use of Instagram to inform their own storytelling (Mozdzer Gil, 2014).

As with this study, many of these previous studies applied an experiential learning approach to immerse students in producing content for social media. Experiential learning emphasizes the role that experience plays in the learning process (Kolb et al., 2011), which consists of a four-stage cycle that requires concrete experiences and serves as the basis for observations and reflection, allowing students to form or modify ideas and then apply those ideas to their next experience. This approach is considered fundamental to meaningful learning (Lewis & Williams, 1994) and provides aspiring journalists with experiences that simulate the workplace (Steel et al., 2007).

The ascension of TikTok: In 2014, Chinese entrepreneurs Alex Zhu and Luyu Yang launched the app Musical.ly (Schwedel, 2018). It allowed users to create and share short videos of them lip-synching and dancing to songs and became popular among teenagers in the Americas and Europe (Dave, 2018). In 2017, Beijing-based internet conglomerate Byte-Dance Technology Company acquired Musical.ly (Iyengar, 2017) and merged it with its own similar app, known as Douyin, which had 100 million users in China and Thailand (Tidy & Smith Galer, 2020). For the international market, ByteDance rebranded the app TikTok while maintaining the name Douyin in China. ByteDance also owns a news aggregator called Jinri Toutiao in China (Liao, 2018).

TikTok is a free social networking site, primarily accessed through a smartphone application. Users post 15-second videos, known as TikToks, but also may connect several clips for up to 60 seconds of total recording (Matsakis, 2019). In addition, users may upload longer videos that were not recorded within the app (Schwedel, 2018). The app provides a library of song clips as well as access to songs through Apple Music (Matsakis, 2018). Music and hashtags play integral roles on TikTok. Hashtags serve as an organizing mechanism to group similar videos together (Saad, 2020) and connect users through TikTok #challenges. Music drives TikTok Duets in which a split screen enables one user to sing the same song as another.

TikTok divides content into two feeds. An algorithm generates the stream of videos that appear in For You, the default homepage, based on videos the user has watched (Matsakis, 2018). Users also explicitly signal their likes by adding a video to their favorites or dislikes by tapping the "not interested" button (Perez, 2020). The other feed, called Following, shows videos posted by people or hashtags that the user follows.

TikTok's popularity has grown rapidly in the United States. In 18 months, starting in February 2020, the app grew from 26.7 million monthly active users (Lerman, Nakashima, & Greene, 2020) to more than 100 million (Sherman, 2020). More than 50 million Americans used the app daily (Sherman, 2020).

USA Today, *TeenVogue*, NBC News, ESPN, *Bustle*, and more than 150 other news organizations and journalists have begun producing content for TikTok (Zaffarano, 2019). For example, NBC News' "Stay Tuned" posts 15-second videos featuring one of the show's three hosts commenting on news (Flynn, 2019), and NPR's "Planet Money" explained economic concepts such as marginal benefit and marginal cost in a 54-second video (Liederman, 2020). However, those efforts remain the minority. Most news organizations rarely use TikTok (Bell, 2020). Similarly, few journalists used Twitter for work purposes in Twitter's early years (Hewett, 2013), but they embraced it within seven years of its launch (Peterson, 2014). On TikTok, *The Dallas Morning News* has posted eight videos, including one documenting the first day of the city's stay-at-home order during the COVID-19 pandemic (*Dallas Morning News* Official TikTok, 2020). A review of CNN anchor Max Foster's videos suggest that journalists are trying to find the right tone to strike. Foster has posted videos ranging from him lip-synching to a song about spicy peppermints to a list of deaths related to COVID-19 (Miller, 2020).

The Washington Post's TikTok account may be the most well-documented experiment. Video produc-

er Dave Jorgenson started *The Washington Post*'s account in May 2018 (Nover, 2019) and added more than 486,000 followers by mid-2020 (Dyakon, 2020). He garnered attention with the "playful nature" of the content but said he hoped to incorporate news value into videos eventually (Tenbarge, 2019). *The Post*'s strategy was to "jump in and be part of the fun" before posting news "in the way that reflects the platform" (Beaujon, 2019). In fact, *The Post*'s content evolved to address serious events that dominated 2020 such as the Black Lives Matter protests. For example, Jorgenson yielded the account to colleagues Jonathan Capehart, who defined systemic racism in less than one minute, and Karen Attiah, who explained Juneteenth. *The Post* also has leveraged its TikTok account to identify stories about the coronavirus (Green, 2020) and to show how much work goes into its other stories (Miller, 2020).

Concerns about TikTok: As its popularity surged, TikTok faced concerns about the Beijing-based company controlling it. American lawmakers worried how ByteDance is censoring speech on TikTok and how the Chinese company stores personal data (Roumeliotis, Yang, Wang, & Alper, 2019). For example, TikTok instructed its content moderators to censor videos that mentioned Tiananmen Square, Tibetan independence and other criticisms of China's socialist system (Hern, 2019). Similarly, *The Washington Post* found that searching #hongkong on Twitter led to posts about pro-democracy marchers whereas the same search on TikTok led to videos of playful selfies and singalongs, not protests (Harwell & Romm, 2019).

TikTok also failed to safeguard user information. In the United States, TikTok paid $5.7 million to settle accusations that Musical.ly illegally collected personal information about children under the age 13, violating the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (Kang, 2019). In 2020, a research team found vulnerabilities within the TikTok application that allowed hackers to upload unauthorized videos, reveal personal information, and otherwise manipulate accounts (Boxiner, Vaknin, Volodin, Barda, & Zaikin, 2020). Other social media platforms experienced similar breaches, such as when hackers gained access to Twitter's internal systems, sent tweets from 45 of the 130 accounts they targeted, and were able to view the personal information of all targeted accounts (Zakrzewski, 2020). The data firm Cambridge Analytica obtained data of an estimated 50 million Facebook users in 2014 and 2015 under false pretenses (Harwell & Dwoskin, 2019). The security concerns about TikTok, however, have prompted the U.S. Department of Defense to go as far as to warn military personnel not to use TikTok (Vigdor, 2020), and the U.S. Army banned the app from military-issued smartphones (Cox, 2019). The U.S Army allows soldiers to use Facebook, Twitter and other social media apps but prohibits them from engaging in partisan politics ("Soldiers and Families: U.S. Army Social Media," 2016). On the video-streaming service Twitch, the U.S. Army esports team shows its members playing military shooter game "Call of Duty: Warzone" and chats with other users on the streaming service (Gault, 2020).

The Communist Party of China has engaged in a well-documented pattern of censoring speech (Qiu, 1999; MacKinnon, 2008; Xu & Albert, 2014). Chinese authorities have censored posts on social media, accessed private information, and surveilled private communications on social media platforms (Tager, Jet al., 2018), as well as enlisting the help of technology companies to carry out this censorship. During President Xi Jinpin's reign, the Chinese government has increased censorship, particularly during the COVID-19 outbreak ("China's online censors tighten grip after brief coronavirus respite," 2020). Social media networks routinely deleted posts that criticized the government and blocked related keywords (Ma, 2018). Researchers found that YY, a live-streaming platform in China, and WeChat, a messaging service owned by Chinesse technology giant Tencent, censored coronavirus-related content, beginning in late December 2019 and increased censorship as COVID-19 spread (Ruan, Knockel, & Crete-Nishihata, 2020).

ByteDance executives have vowed that the company never has provided, and never would provide, user data to the Chinese government ("TikTok halts Hong Kong access after security law," 2020). Skeptics described it as a "useless, if not deliberately misleading, guarantee" (Lian, 2020), and they viewed TikTok as a "dangerous Trojan horse for Chinese Communist Party espionage" (Matsakis, 2020). Defenders argued that outlawing TikTok runs counter to the American ideal of free expression (Matsakis, 2020) and reflects Sinophobia that President Donald Trump stoked as part of his trade war with China (Goodin, 2020). Furthermore, President Trump fell victim to a TikTok prank in June 2020, when TikTok users registered for tickets to a campaign rally with no intention of

attending, resulting in the Trump campaign boasting of a million requests for tickets but only 6,200 people arriving at the 19,000-seat auditorium (Silverstein, 2020). The conflict culminated in President Trump's executive order setting a deadline by when TikTok needed to sell its U.S. operations to an American-based buyer or cease U.S. operations (Swanson, Mccabe, & Griffith, 2020). The legality of the American president's action remains unclear (Allyn, 2020), but the high-profile debate thrust the matter into the spotlight – and onto users' screens. Vanessa Pappas, who oversees TikTok's North American business, sent a video in September 2020 that went to TikTok users (Herrman, 2020). It said, "TikTok is here to stay."

With growing interest in TikTok and continued experimentation by news organizations, this study posed the following research questions:

RQ1: What will students learn from producing a story on TikTok?
RQ2: Do students consider it inappropriate for news organizations to tell stories on Tik-Tok because of legal and ethical concerns?
RQ3: Can TikTok successfully be integrated into a journalism course?

Method

Procedure: The TikTok module spanned three class sessions: exploring journalistic, legal and ethical questions around TikTok; producing stories on deadline using TikTok; and reflecting on those experiences. This approach facilitated the four stages of the experiential learning cycle. It was part of an upper-division course designed for students who had completed classes covering the fundamentals of reporting, writing, multimedia storytelling, and media ethics. The course began in late January 2020, and the research project occurred before the coronavirus pandemic prompted colleges and universities in the United States to shift courses online.

Before the module, students completed an in-class survey to identify social media platforms they use regularly. Participation was voluntary and anonymous in both this survey *(n=35)* and the post-assignment survey *(n=34)*. Both surveys were completed online through a link incorporated into the course's learning management system (e.g. D2L, formerly known as Desire2Learn). Students were required to complete the readings and assignments for the course, but they were not offered an incentive for completing the surveys. The Institutional Review Board approved the project and its procedures. The pre-experience survey provided a baseline of students' familiarity with Tik-Tok. Thirty-five (35) of the 38 students completed it. Slightly more than one-quarter (25.71%) already had TikTok accounts. By comparison, 97.14% had Instagram accounts and 94.29% had Twitter accounts.

Before the first session focusing on TikTok, students read two articles that looked at whether news organizations should use TikTok and how some do. They then watched examples of TikToks created by NBC News, *BuzzFeed*, *Now This*, *The Washington Post*, Vice, and *USA Today*. The examples included a news story looking at escalating tensions between the United States and Iran, a feature about exercises for people who hate exercising, and a self-referential video of a newsroom employee performing stunts on his skateboard, among others. Students also were encouraged to seek other examples on their own.

In preparation for the assignment, the module began with an in-class overview of the history and evolution of the TikTok, tracing the app from its roots as Musical.ly to its rise as the top entertainment app downloaded from Apple's App Store and Google's Play Store. Students then discussed and critiqued the examples that they watched before class, with a few shown on an overhead screen, allowing students to refer to specific moments or techniques. They also considered how well the videos lived up to the ideals of journalism. The lesson proceeded to introduce concerns about privacy, security, and censorship on Tik-Tok. It included specifics about the fine TikTok paid to the Federal Trade Commission, the United States investigation into the app, and examples of censorship of political content. The lesson also pointed out that the app does not show when a creator posts a video, hindering efforts to determine how new or old it is. It ended by introducing the basics of the assignment: Students would work with a partner to create a Tik-Tok story in the next class session and should use the time between classes to identify an event or issue on which to produce their story.

In the next class session, students were told how to submit their stories and were reminded to maintain fundamental journalism standards of fairness, accuracy, honesty, and transparency. Otherwise, they had discretion over the content of the stories and their storytelling approach. The assignment purposefully provided latitude because of the evolving nature of TikTok storytelling. Each student worked with one classmate, enabling one person to hold the phone

while the other interviewed sources or appeared on screen. They had the rest of the 75-minute class session to report and produce a story. Their video could not exceed 60 seconds, and all the stories had to include the same hashtag so students could follow the hashtag and eventually see the work of classmates.

In the third session, students were asked to complete a 12-question survey meant to generate quantitative and qualitive data. The qualitative data were analyzed using the constant comparative method of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As with the previous survey, participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in two separate sections of the same advanced multimedia journalism course at a large public university on the West Coast in spring semester 2020. Thirty-four (34) of the 38 students completed the post-assignment survey. All of the students were journalism majors with the exception of a lone public relations major. The majority planned to pursue careers in journalism (73.53%), and others planned to work in public relations (14.71%) or advertising (2.94%). Three (8.82%) of the respondents said they had not chosen a career path yet. Slightly more respondents identified as male (52.94%) than as female (44.12%); no one identified as non-binary, and 2.94% preferred not to select a gender identity. The vast majority (91.18%) of the respondents fell between the ages of 18 and 24, with the remainder between 25 and 34. The sample represents a diversity of races and ethnicities: 55.88% Latinx, 23.53% Caucasian, 11.76% Pacific Islander, 11.76% Asian, and 5.88% Black. Most of the students were juniors (61.76%) or seniors (29.41%), with the remaining three (8.82%) sophomores. After completing the survey, students also watched one another's examples and exchanged in-person feedback.

Results

RQ1: What will students learn from producing a story for TikTok?

The open-ended question "what did you learn from the TikTok assignment" encouraged students to consider whether they learned anything but preserved the ability to say no learning occurred or to criticize the assignment. In fact, one of the 34 respondents commented, "Other than the fact that journalists use it, nothing really. I use TikTok in my free time and already knew how to use it." However, the most commonly referenced theme in the constant comparison

section of the data analysis was creativity. One student reported, "I learned how to be creative with the way I present information." Another student reported learning "how to be more creative and relevant with content." The second most mentioned theme involved learning to think and act quickly in new situations. One student reported, "I learned how to think on my feet." Another reporting learning "how to come up with a subject quickly." A few students linked thinking quickly with creativity. For example, one student reported learning "how to be creative on the spot." Several students also mentioned that the assignment introduced a new style of storytelling. One student reported, "I learned that certain aspects of social media apps have the potential to be effectively used by journalists in order to take on a different manner of storytelling and reach a varied audience."

Skills developed: The quantitative section asked students to identify specific skills, if any, that the TikTok assignment helped them develop. Students could select more than one skill from a list of 10 and add others not on the list. An overwhelming majority (71%) selected "creativity" followed by "adaptability" (67.65%). At least half of the respondents also selected collaboration (55.88%), storytelling (52.94%), videography (52.94%), and editing (50%). A little more than one-third (35.29%) said the assignment helped hone their interviewing skills. Fewer students selected fact checking (8.82%), photography (5.88%), and writing (2.94%).

Most beneficial aspect of experience: When asked what they considered the most beneficial aspect of the assignment, similar themes emerged through the constant comparison analysis, with the most commonly mentioned theme that of being forced to think and act quickly. One student reported, "I liked being able to work within a shortened time limit and putting the pressure on for an idea." Another reported, "Being in a situation where I had to think quickly and produce usable content at a fast pace will help me with my future career. This assignment reassured me that I am able to execute under pressure." The second most mentioned theme involved learning to tailor content for a specific platform. One student reported, "For TikTok, you really have to put thought into how you can communicate a story or idea through the channel. You can't simply refit your story into a TikTok video." Students noted that the specific advantages and disadvantages of the platform made it more effective for certain types of stories, or influenced how they might

choose an angle or frame a subject for storytelling on TikTok specifically. Another student reported, "It may not seem like big deal, but TikTok is becoming more and more popular, so I think it's important to know its functions and all the ways it can be used."

Practicality of experience: Students selected options on a Likert scale that ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* when asked whether the assignment was relevant to the future careers. As ordinal data, Likert scales do not lend themselves to statistical operations (Fleming & Nellis, 2000). Half (50%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that assignment was relevant. Almost one-third (29.41%) selected "neutral," and about one-fifth (20.59%) "disagreed." They selected the exact same rankings when asked if the assignment benefited their professional development. Half (50%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed." Almost one-third (29.41%) selected "neutral," about one-fifth (20.59%) "disagreed," and none "strongly disagreed." In the open-ended portion, several students mentioned that the assignment introduced them to a social media platform that they knew was popular but had not used. One student commented, "I think that a new employer will likely ask me to use a new medium that I am unfamiliar with. This assignment helped me swallow my pride."

RQ2: Do students consider it inappropriate for news organizations to tell stories on TikTok because of legal and ethical concerns?

Very few students said journalists should avoid using TikTok as part of their storytelling repertoire be-cause of legal or ethical concerns. Less than one-fifth (17.65%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that journalists should not tell stories on TikTok because of these issues. More than half (55.88%) selected "neutral." More than one-quarter (26.47%) "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed." In the open-ended section of the survey, several students indicated that they thought that employers would expect them to be familiar and comfortable with TikTok. None elaborated on the legal or ethical concerns. When asked whether TikTok is a useful platform through which journalists could reach new audiences, a clear majority (64.71%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed." About one-fifth (20.59%) selected "neutral." The remainder (14.71%) "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed."

RQ3: Can a TikTok assignment be successfully integrated into a journalism course?

When students were asked what they would suggest doing differently with future classes in terms of the TikTok assignment, the most commonly referenced theme in the constate comparison section of the data analysis was nothing. One student commented, "Since TikTok is so new, a lot of people still have not downloaded it yet, so I think the assignment is very important. I do not have any suggestions at this time." Another student remarked, "I thought the TikTok assignment was perfectly given. We got to make our video on any subject we wanted, so it was fun to explore campus and find something we like to make our TikTok." The second most common theme was a suggestion to give students more time to complete

Table 1: Practicality of Experience

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Relevant to future career	0%	20.59%	29.41%	38.24%	11.76%
Beneficial to professional development	0%	20.59%	29.41%	35.29%	14.71%

Table 2: Ethics

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
"I believe that journalists should not tell stories on TikTok because of legal or ethical questions about it and the company that owns it."	2.94%	23.53%	55.88%	5.88%	11.76%
"I believe that TikTok is a useful platform through which journalists could reach new audiences."	0.03%	11.76%	20.59%	47.06%	17.65%

the assignment. One student suggested, "I liked this assignment. The only thing I would suggest is probably making the assignment due the next time in class." Another student commented, "I know for my TikTok, we were struggling to edit some things so we needed a little more time to polish the video nicely."

Discussion

The study's first research question, RQ1, asked what students would learn through the assignment. The deadline-driven assignment simulated real-world pressures and forced students to collaborate and solve problems while in the field. Like Byrd and Denney (2018) found with their Instagram research and Kinsky and Bruce (2016) found with their Twitter research, student participants in this project reported that the assignment challenged them to "think on their feet." Kinsky and Bruce required students to live-tweet either a televised event or one that they attended in person. Byrd and Denney assigned students to interview and photograph 12 sources for an Instagram assignment inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement. The TikTok project diverged from Byrd and Denney's approach in two notable ways. Unlike Byrd and Denney's project, this project imposed an immediate deadline. TikTok, with its reliance on short video, also does not lend itself to traditional portrait photography or long-form captions as Instagram does. Unlike Kinsky and Bruce's Twitter project, text plays a minor role in TikTok storytelling aside from hashtags.

As upper-division students, this study's participants had completed prerequisites in basic and advanced reporting and writing. Several students mentioned in open-ended questions that the assignment called upon interviewing and editing skills. However, rather than incrementally improving skills routinely addressed in the department's curriculum, this assignment required students to adapt to new technology and find innovative ways of telling stories. One pair interviewed students about what they knew about the then-burgeoning coronavirus, added on-screen "stickers" that labeled responses as true or false, and ended with prevention tips. Another looked at the diversity of the campus population, connecting it to recent social movements. Others covered on-campus events such as a student-involvement fair. Notably, the majority of students had never used TikTok. They learned to use technology while simultaneously producing content. This suggests the assignment accom-

plished two of the imperatives that Lynch (2015) recommended: self-instruction and early adoption.

The ability to adapt and learn while working in the field has become paramount in journalism of the 21st century. Kara Kearns, director of operations for Politico, captured this maxim in 2015 during her keynote at a George Washington University journalism conference: "The best piece of advice I can give you is to be adaptable. This world is in constant flux, and if you don't adapt to it, you will get left behind" (Berkead, 2015). Similarly, online news professionals ranked "ability to learn" as the No. 1 skill needed at the time of the survey and in the future (Fahmy, 2008). The findings suggest this assignment helped participants practice adapting in real time and hone skills that should outlast individual platforms. Journalism programs need to help students learn how to discover, interpret, and navigate their ways through the future, including how to adjust to changing technologies and practices (Picard, 2014).

The study's second question explored whether students would deem it inappropriate for journalists and news organizations to use TikTok, particularly given the concerns about corporate censorship and data storage practices. Respondents' overall stance largely fell in the neutral territory. Of those with stronger opinions, more indicated that they considered it acceptable – rather than unacceptable – for journalists to produce work on TikTok, despite the ethical and legal concerns that some lawmakers and activists have raised. This is noteworthy, in particularly, because Generation Z, born after 1996, has been called the first generation of "social natives," having grown up with social media (Erasmus & Doorenbos, 2020).

The study's final question was whether a TikTok assignment could be integrated successfully into a journalism course. The answer appears to be affirmative. In the open-ended portion, students tended to encourage the continued use of the assignment and overall module. Students said they learned important lessons and enjoyed the assignment. The assignment required students to collaborate, experiment with new technology and work on deadline rather than remain passive observers. Some appreciated the assignment so much that they wanted to do more. One student remarked, "I'm intrigued on learning more" about TikTok. Another student suggested that the class produces more TikToks, allowing students to have a TikTok portfolio. The assignment's design also allows it to be modified and used with still-unknown plat-

forms as technology changes.

In totality, the outcomes of this project suggest the assignment nurtured critical-thinking skills. Scholars across disciplines have published a multitude of definitions of critical thinking. D'Angelo (1971) defines critical thinking as the process of evaluating statements, arguments, and experiences (pp. 7-8). Ennis (1987) defines critical thinking as "reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 10). Siegel (1988) notes that "despite widespread recent interest in critical thinking in education, there is no clear agreement concerning the referent of the term (p. 6). However, two theories tend to dominate discussions of fostering critical thinking in college-level courses: Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of educational objective and Perry's (1970) theory of the intellectual and ethical development of college students. In Bloom's taxonomy, the critical thinking process reaches fruition when students can apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information. In Perry's model, the highest stages of critical thinking involve students articulating their own opinion, evaluating by comparing their opinions with others' opinions, and then deciding what should be done. The findings suggest this assignment helped students advance toward the higher stages of learning.

Limitations: This research project involved students at one university, resulting in a small sample. However, the sample was diverse in terms of races and ethnicities. Another limitation is that the results are based on self-reported data provided by students.

Suggestions for future research: Future studies could examine using TikTok to tell stories on a consistent basis over a period of time. Other studies also could explore whether student journalists encounter censorship when posting content critical of the Chinese government or about TikTok itself.

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