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## War in the Age of TikTok

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### Abstract

The rise of social media has revolutionized information-sharing and the way in which people learn about important events. As evidenced by the use of TikTok in the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, social media has the ability to connect people from conflict zones to individuals around the world. Although dramatic video clips can be critical for our understanding of real-time developments and for pressuring policy-makers to act, they also open the door to misinformation that creates confusion and division.

### A Social Media Revolution

Approximately a decade ago, social media changed the world by connecting individuals from across the globe. Similar to the impact of television and live reporting in war zones during the Vietnam War, the social media revolution has dramatically changed how people obtain and process information from conflict zones in the twenty-first century.

Today, the popular social media platform TikTok is once again transforming how people interact with news by providing users with short video clips from the war in Ukraine. These videos portray in dramatic fashion the destruction of urban infrastructure, life in bomb shelters, and the successes and failures of both the Russian and Ukrainian armies, as well as the responses of millions of global users. The relatively user-friendly nature of TikTok makes it easy to create and share videos from the conflict in real time and reach an audience of nearly a billion people. The platform provides an online space where people can become more educated and advocate for change.

Yet for all the good that TikTok brings, bad actors have been using the platform to spread misinformation and construct a false narrative that creates division and sows confusion regarding the war. This phenomenon is not new to TikTok: the Russian state has frequently deployed such techniques to generate infighting and hinder a unified response. These techniques pose a particular danger because they create an environment where people like, share, and absorb information that may not necessarily be accurate.

With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, dubbed the first TikTok war, the platform is being used to spread infor-

mation and misinformation regarding the conflict. In connecting a younger generation with videos of the devastation, it may also be fostering a dangerous situation where misinformation flourishes and results in division amongst Ukrainians, Europeans, and Americans.

### TikTok's Reach and Influence

TikTok's rise to global prominence began in 2018 after the China-based company ByteDance purchased Musical.ly and rebranded under the name TikTok. The app allows users to create short videos and use various songs and voiceovers to lip-sync viral content. The platform's specific and personalized algorithm facilitates users watching clips similar to videos they have previously made or liked. TikTok's success can be measured by its nearly 1 billion active monthly users worldwide, including an estimated 50 million daily users in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Approximately 70% of American teenagers use TikTok, with the majority of users being members of Generation Z, or individuals born between 1997 and 2012.<sup>2</sup> In fact, of the nearly 100 million monthly users in the United States, 37.3 million are between the ages of 10 and 25.<sup>3</sup> Studies have shown that almost a quarter of American adults get their news from TikTok, a figure that rises to almost half among Millennials and Generation Z adults.<sup>4</sup>

These statistics are critical because Generation Z and Millennials will soon be the largest political voting bloc. By 2028, an estimated 49% of American voters will be either Millennials or Generation Z, meaning that future voters will largely be accustomed to obtaining information from social media rather than traditional

1 Dean, B. (2022). How Many People Use TikTok? 80+ TikTok Statistics. Backlinko. Available at: <https://backlinko.com/tiktok-users>

2 Galaskas, T. (2021). How Gen Z is Turning TikTok into the next Google. Available at: <https://www.abc27.com/national/how-gen-z-is-turning-tik-tok-into-the-next-google/>

3 Insider Intelligence Editors. (2021). More Gen Zers now use TikTok than Instagram in the US. Available at: <https://www.emarketer.com/content/more-us-gen-zers-now-use-tiktok-than-instagram>

4 Mimo, D. & Farah, H. (2022). War as seen on TikTok: Ukraine clips get views whether true or not. The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/mar/05/tiktok-ukraine-russia-invasion-clips-get-views-whether-true-or-not>

mainstream media.<sup>5</sup> In the context of the current crisis, although members of Generation Z only comprise about 10% of eligible voters, they still have a voice, and their opinions and views impact the kind of legislation that policymakers support.<sup>6</sup>

Taken together, these statistics regarding TikTok's reach and its users' influence show how important the social media platform is, demonstrating that it is critical to monitor how people are using the app and what news they receive. With this in mind, let us turn to examine how Ukrainians and Russians are using TikTok to spread their respective messages.

### How Ukrainians and Russians Use TikTok

Both Ukrainians and Russians are engaging in the creation and sharing of videos. Many of these videos have gone viral and have been liked by people outside the conflict.

Within Ukraine, users have been producing videos that let viewers around the world see the deprivation they are experiencing. Some show life in bomb shelters. Others highlight the damage and destruction of buildings or display destroyed military equipment, including tanks, missiles, and planes. Some clips are aimed at the domestic Ukrainian audience, such as informational videos to help citizens survive the onslaught.

In contrast, Russians have been posting TikToks that show support for Russian troops, as well as videos that spread propagandistic government claims that Ukraine is attacking its own civilians, faking deaths, and committing aggressive acts.

The differences between the two sides are significant and highlight the potential risk of the spread of misinformation. Information is being weaponized, with supporters of both Ukraine and Russia spreading misinformation to promote their causes.

#### *Ukraine*

Ukrainian videos show both the horror of the conflict and moments of hope. One of the most viral videos includes a post by the user Valerissh, who posts videos depicting a typical day in a Ukrainian bomb shelter. The video has over 40 million views, 5.7 million likes, and 29,000 comments. In this specific post, she shows the struggles that ordinary civilians face, as well as the destruction that has been inflicted on her city. This TikTok enables viewers to see the human face of war, as well as demonstrating the reach that a post can have.

Another video that has received a lot of attention is a clip posted by the user yutsyartis showing a Ukrain-

ian soldier launching a rocket-propelled grenade against a Russian target. The post has over 51 million views, 3.3 million likes, and 47,000 comments. In 8 seconds, this TikTok gives viewers a glimpse of the ongoing battle.

Lastly, a TikTok posted by CBS News shows the damage to physical infrastructure and human life that a Russian missile strike inflicted on a children's and maternity hospital. In the 28-second clip, viewers see injured civilians, including pregnant women; children in shock; and a blood-stained bed. The images horrified people around the world by showing the brutal devastation facing innocent civilians. The TikTok has nearly 9 million views, 900,000 likes, and 26,000 comments. Once again, viewers are witnessing the violence that everyone in Ukraine faces.

Together, these three TikToks show different angles from Ukraine: life in a bomb shelter, a battle scene, and injured civilians. By depicting various facets of the war in short yet powerful snippets, they allow TikTok users from around the globe to share in Ukrainians' experiences and learn about what is happening on the ground. The Ukrainian videos contrast strongly with those coming from Russia.

#### *Russia*

The Kremlin is using TikTok to promote its military activities in Ukraine. Its propaganda videos include posts claiming to show Ukrainians pretending to be dead or injured in an effort to blame Russia. Although many fact-checkers have shown these videos to be false or taken out of context, they remain viewable and shared on TikTok, meaning misinformation is actively being spread to millions of people.

One of the most viewed videos being used to spread misinformation includes a news segment of a reporter in front of rows of "body bags." During the piece, an individual in one of the body bags moves. Pro-Russian social media users claim this video is from Ukraine and proves that people are not actually dying but rather the Ukrainian government is faking deaths to make the West target Russia. The video has been debunked as misleading, as it is actually from a climate protest in Vienna, Austria. The Kremlin likely shared this video to make people question what is really happening in Ukraine and whether or not the media and/or politicians are telling the truth.

A similar video that has been used to claim that Ukrainians are only pretending to be under threat includes a clip of a large crowd being told by a director to run and scream. Russia claims this is recent footage and shows Ukrainian officials telling civilians to act like

5 Griffin R., Frey W., & Teixeira, R., 2019. America's electoral future. American Progress. Available at: <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/americas-electoral-future-3/>

6 See Griffin et. Al, 2019.

they are in danger. In reality, however, the recording is from a movie set in London in 2013; the clip has absolutely nothing to do with Ukraine. Nevertheless, this video has been viewed thousands of times on various TikTok pages that claim it is related to the war.

Finally, there are also videos from Russian influencers supporting the operation being promoted by Russia and questioning the authenticity of images of injured civilians. Although most of these posts have been flagged as propaganda, they nevertheless reflect an effort by Russia to spread misinformation regarding the invasion. In the first such TikTok under study, a user repeats the false claim that one of the women injured during the attack on the Mariupol maternity hospital is actually an actress pretending to be injured. This TikTok is completely false and has been debunked numerous times. Nevertheless, the video, posted by the user *furrygrisly*, has over 13,000 views.

The second such TikTok is a montage of clips of Russian influencers seemingly reading from a script while stating their support for military action. Although as of the writing of this article it cannot be confirmed if the influencers were paid or forced to make these statements, the video posted by *realraywilliams* shows that some TikTokers have flagged these clips to highlight the risks of misinformation.

In sum, although they post different content, users in both countries comprehend the TikTok's reach and the importance of using it.

### The Danger of Getting News from TikTok

As demonstrated in the previous section, there are both real and misleading videos on TikTok. Although some videos get debunked and removed, there are millions of posts on the platform and it would be impossible to catch every single fake video. As such, many users frequently come into contact with inaccurate content.

Additionally, TikTok's algorithm is designed in such a way that once a user likes a video, the user will see more videos with similar content. As a result, once someone likes a misleading post, it becomes more difficult for them to differentiate between real and fake information.

Two examples that highlight this phenomenon are a TikTok that claimed to show Russian nuclear weapons entering Ukraine and a video that depicts a battle scene. Both of these TikToks reached millions of people before they were flagged as misinformation.

The original video claiming to show Russian nukes entering Ukraine received 18 million views before TikTok removed the post for violating its guidelines. However, the video continues to be reposted, including by

the user *radewnnn* (linked above), meaning users are still coming into contact with misinformation intended to create panic.

The second clip claims to show footage of the "Ghost of Kyiv" shooting down two Russian planes in 30 seconds. However, the post is inaccurate: it was taken from a video game called *Digital Combat Simulator*. This clip has been spread numerous times in various videos on TikTok and other social media platforms. The misleading video has even been shared by the Ukrainian government. This TikTok demonstrates that it is critical to factcheck all content prior to sharing it, since such fake videos feed into the Russian misinformation campaign that claims the West and Ukraine are making propaganda pieces.

These two examples reveal the danger of getting news from TikTok, as it would be impossible to monitor videos and fact-check millions of posts. This is not to say that all videos on TikTok are misleading—but by sharing fake videos, the platform not only enables pro-Russian individuals to claim the war is Western propaganda, but also allows deniers around the world to declare all information coming from Ukraine to be misinformation.

### Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the ways in which Ukrainians and Russians are using TikTok during the ongoing war and the risk of getting one's news from the platform. What lessons can we draw from this? First, through this mode of information-sharing, a younger segment of society is engaging directly with videos and images from the war and is becoming more educated about the situation. Second, this growing awareness matters politically, as most Western viewers are current or soon-to-be voters, meaning they have the ability to push policymakers to respond and hold accountable those who do not act, thus directly impacting the responses of Western countries, whether with regard to the provision of military support or humanitarian aid. Finally, users must be cautious and continue to flag content that is misleading, as failing to do so will aid Russian misinformation campaigns and sow division.

While the outcome of the conflict remains difficult to predict, social media platforms such as TikTok have enabled people from all over the world to witness the immense devastation the war has wrought. As this war continues and other conflicts arise, it will be vital to monitor all social media platforms and understand how individuals are engaging with the content, as this will directly impact how political leaders react.

#### *About the Author*

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