PERCEPTION OF JOURNALISM STUDENTS ON TIKTOK AS AN INFORMATIVE TOOL

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
TikTok Journalism Students Information Social Networking Education ICT Perception	TikTok is a social network that has experienced exponential growth since 2020. Its mode of operation, with short videos and based on the skinner box, makes it one of the most addictive social networks. Its users, mainly teenagers and young adults, spend long periods of time consuming the content offered, making it a powerful communication tool. This article analyses journalism students' perception of the social network TikTok as a tool for disseminating news content. To this end, a practical exercise was conducted on the social network in question in class, after which a survey was administered to the students. The results of this survey demonstrate that, despite initially expressing a high degree of reluctance to utilise TikTok as a news tool, students subsequently altered their assessment of it, perceiving it as a useful platform on which to develop their journalistic work.

1. Introduction

Since their inception in the mid-1990s and, above all, with their expansion in the early 2000s, social networks have fundamentally altered the communication paradigm that had previously prevailed. Users ceased to be mere passive spectators and became active creators of content of all kinds. These platforms, which are typical of Web 2.0, began to proliferate uncontrollably, constituting "an informal space for communication in a public space" (Viñarás Abad and Cabezuelo Lorenzo, 2012, p.89).

According to the dictionary of the Real Academia Española, social networks are Internet platforms that bring a large number of users into contact with each other. The use of diverse technologies enables the distribution of content generated by media groups and users alike to a vast number of individuals. These networks facilitate the expression of ideas and the sharing of information, reaching a diverse array of audiences.

In 2004, the advent of Facebook saw these platforms attract 226 million users. Twenty years later, they are used by more than 5 billion users (We Are Social, 2024), demonstrating their remarkable capacity to engage the masses.

The aforementioned study indicates that 83.6% of the Spanish population utilizes these platforms, which are increasingly occupying a greater proportion of the communication ecosystem of society (Galindo-Rubio, et al., 2023, p.149).

These platforms facilitate two-way communication between users, encouraging collaboration through the introduction of new formats (De Vicente Domínguez and Sierra Sánchez, 2022). These platforms facilitate participation and interactivity, transforming into mass media. As Pacheco-Barriga and Román Quiñones (2023, p.140) observe, they engender "novel modes of information consumption in which users assume a more prominent role, while also offering distinctive and impactful methods of capturing the public's attention amidst the deluge of content they encounter daily".

These developments have had a profound impact on all areas of communication, with journalism being one of the most affected. The evolution of the media, with the advent of the Internet and social networks, has fundamentally altered the way in which audiences are informed. In addition, the journalistic media have had to adapt and create departments responsible for producing special content for social networks. This content must be adapted to the audiences and the new narratives, "modifying the way of doing journalism" (Sierra Sánchez et al., 2020, p. 190). This is because social networks have become one of the most important sources of daily information, accessible to all at no cost (Cao, 2020, p. 272).

These platforms serve as gateways to information for the younger population, (Zazo Correa and Martínez-Fresneda, 2024, p.2), who access information in a different way to previous generations. Information is transmitted instantaneously (Maldonado Pérez, 2024), allowing both users and journalists to be aware of any event happening at the exact moment. This enables them to remain informed about "the latest news on certain topics and to assess the level of citizens' interest or lack of interest in particular issues" (Herrero Curiel, 2012, p.1114). This is a consequence of the speed and interactivity that these platforms facilitate, allowing information professionals to engage directly with their audiences "through provision of information and in return, receipt of feedback, participation in the journalistic space, appearances on TV, where they also introduce photographs, data, participation and videos, among others" (Cantos García and Cumba Castro, 2018, p. 118).

The reach and ease with which social networks reach their audiences "could not be achieved using traditional media" (Olivares García, et al., 2022, p.11). They are able to reach large numbers of people, primarily young people, by bypassing borders and becoming global communication channels. Video is the predominant format within the offerings of social networks. The utilisation of brief videos on social media platforms has the potential to enhance the efficacy and visibility of media outlets (Brigas, et al., 2023). This enables the dissemination of news content to a substantial number of users, with the possibility of engagement through various forms of interaction. This is not a feasible option in traditional media. In this regard, the social media platform TikTok stands out, as its content is primarily based on short, highly original videos that achieve significant virality.

This paper presents an investigation into the perception of journalism students with respect to the social network TikTok. To this end, a practical project was carried out for the subject "Evolution of information in the audiovisual media" with students in the fourth year of the Degree in Journalism at the Complutense University of Madrid. This consisted of the production of a news report on this platform.

As will be demonstrated below, the results indicate that the students have a positive perception of the suitability of TikTok as a platform for disseminating information and their interest in undertaking internships of a similar nature.

1.1. Justification and Objectives

The field of education must capitalise on the potential of new information and communication technologies, from platforms to devices, and integrate them into their teaching methodologies. On the one hand, this provides students with new ways of learning, utilising current technologies, and on the other hand, it allows teachers and researchers to advance their knowledge of their discipline.

> All fields of knowledge, in general, and the educational sciences, in particular, are simultaneously undergoing a process of change driven by technological evolution that will largely modify the methodological foundations of these disciplines (Galindo-Rubio et al., 2015, p. 28).

As indicated by Sierra Sánchez, et al. (2020, p.191), the Faculties of Communication must support and respond to the emerging training needs of this new 21st-century professional, in line with the needs of the labour market. Furthermore, the emergence of new social networks such as TikTok, their exponential growth in terms of the number of users, and the relevant role they play in the circulation of information, require an understanding of the perception that the new generations of journalists have of these platforms. It is also necessary to demonstrate the capabilities of these tools, as users of this platform spend an average of 34 hours a month consuming content on it, 33 hours and 5 minutes in Spain (We Are Social, 2024). Therefore, it is a social network where the new generations spend a significant portion of their time. 71% of users are between the ages of 18 and 34 (Silverio, 2024), and they utilize this social network to search for a wide range of information.

TikTok was the most downloaded application in the world in 2023 (Ruiz, 2024). This makes it, as of today, the social network with the greatest future projection.

Although their main function is to entertain, social networks such as TikTok are perfectly capable of producing and distributing news of a journalistic nature. For this reason, it is necessary to implement activities focused on the creation of journalistic content using its narrative and technological possibilities.

The following objectives have been identified for this study:

> O1) To ascertain how students respond to the production of journalistic information on TikTok.
> O2) To determine the evolution in students' perception of TikTok as a social network for the distribution of journalistic information following the internship.
> O3) To demonstrate to students the capabilities of new platforms as information tools.
> O4) To identify students' perception of TikTok's capacity as an information transmission platform.

The preceding objectives have been used to inform the following research questions:

> Q1) What is the experience of journalism undergraduate students in developing news pieces for TikTok?
> Q2) What was the students' opinion of TikTok as a news tool before the internship?
> Q3) What is the students' assessment of TikTok as a news tool after the internship?
> Q4) Do the journalism students believe that TikTok can be a suitable platform for the dissemination of journalistic news?

2. The Social Network TikTok

TikTok is a social network that was originally developed under the name Douyin in 2016 in China. A year later, it was launched in other markets under the name TikTok.

Currently, 1.562 billion people use the application, with 2.314 billion users if Douyin, its Chinese counterpart, is included (We Are Social, 2024). This places it as the fifth largest social network in the world. However, as evidenced by the preceding data, due to its youthful demographic and the rapid

growth in the number of users, as well as its status as the most downloaded social network, TikTok is one of the most promising platforms in the current digital landscape.

TikTok is a short video content platform whose mission, as defined by the company, is to "empower creativity and make people enjoy themselves" (TikTok, n.d.). Additionally, the platform aims to inspire and encourage a new generation to have a positive impact on the planet and those around them.

TikTok was initially conceived as a platform for "content creation in short video format," and it has since evolved into one of the most utilized networks among young people, where its audience consumes a considerable amount of graphic content in videos (Gallardo-Camacho, et al., 2023, p.11).

The platform is highly addictive due to its transmission of content in video format of a short duration based on the Skinner box. This encourages users to consume many videos in a short time, which are chosen by an algorithm that searches for relevant content for each user in a personalised way.

The videos offered by this platform are of all kinds, but most of them tend to have a markedly humorous tone. Furthermore, the platform employs various elements, including stickers, filters, GIFs, and music, which collectively contribute to a distinctive visual and stylistic identity. Additionally, the platform offers high visibility for content published, with a global reach and user-friendly functionality.

Although it appears that the primary motivation for creating audiovisual content on TikTok is to gain notoriety, many users consider this platform to be a source of information (Sidorenko Bautista, et al., 2023). Some accounts, such as 'ac2ality', are becoming windows through which journalistic information is transmitted, as was already the case with Twitter (Sidorenko Bautista, et al., 2023), with millions of followers.

This is further compounded by the fact that young people are increasingly disinterested in traditional media. Consequently, TikTok has emerged as a primary source of information for Generation Z, supplanting traditional media in both leisure and information-seeking activities (Díaz-Lucena and Vicente-Fernández, 2023). The fresh and youthful style and tone, coupled with the directness of messages, have made TikTok the social network of choice for the new generation of information consumers.

3. Methodology

In order to achieve the proposed objectives, a practical exercise was carried out to produce a news report through the social network TikTok. This was based on the teaching experience previously developed by Galindo-Rubio, et al. (2017). In this case, the students were required to produce a series of informative contents using the technical possibilities of their smartphones, and their subsequent distribution through a messaging network such as WhatsApp or Telegram.

> The model is presented as an innovative opportunity to produce and disseminate audiovisual information in an immediate, interesting and attractive way. This is achieved through a system that takes advantage of the synergies arising from the technological evolution of smartphones, the video system, broadband connections and messaging applications and social networks. (Galindo-Rubio, et al. 2017, p.200)

To illustrate, an exercise was conducted with students of the subject "Evolution of information in the audiovisual media," taught in the fourth year of the Journalism Degree at the Complutense University of Madrid. In this instance, the students were tasked with generating content for a news program that would subsequently be published via TikTok.

All content was created and distributed using smartphones, with the objective of generating informative pieces that make use of the platform's own characteristics and elements, such as the use of effects, stickers, filters, text, music, and so forth. The primary objective was for the students to discover the possibilities offered by this social network, while maintaining fidelity to its style and tone, and awareness of the target audience.

The experiment was conducted by two subject groups, with a total of 118 students participating. In each of the classes, two teams of approximately 30 individuals were established to create the news items in pairs. This resulted in four distinct news items with an average of 15 items per team.

Once the task was completed, a 14-question survey was distributed to all participants. The survey inquired about the participants' perceptions of TikTok as an information tool, as well as other questions about the platform that are not the subject of this study. Thirteen of the questions were closed-ended,

while the last one was open-ended, allowing respondents to express themselves completely freely. This approach enabled the collection of feedback that could be analysed qualitatively.

In the closed questions, students were asked to provide a score from 1 to 10 for each question. This allowed the students' opinions and perceptions to be quantified. A score of 1 to 4 indicates failure, 5 to 6 signifies a pass, 7 to 8 represents a B, and 9 to 10 denotes an A.

A total of 118 responses were obtained to the different questions posed, which allowed us to ascertain the opinions of future journalists about TikTok as a news medium and as a potential tool for developing their careers.

3.1. Organisation and Implementation of Information Practice in TikTok

As previously stated, two teams of approximately thirty students were established for each group enrolled in the subject. Subsequently, the students were divided into pairs, with each pair responsible for producing a distinct piece of information.

During the initial session, each team was tasked with organising themselves and preparing a summary of the news items they would disseminate in the subsequent class. To accomplish this, they were required to adhere to the principle that the news would be exclusively focused on current events. Consequently, the rundown was not fixed and could be modified in the event of the emergence of a relevant news event.

The decision on these changes, as well as the creation of the rundown, would fall to two students from each team, who would act as editors-in-chief. These pairs were in charge of coordinating their respective teams, making the final decision about the news to be produced, as well as the order in which it would be broadcast. Additionally, they were responsible for determining the theme of the news programme.

Once the coordination of the teams had been completed, the pairs of reporters would wait until the next class – the following day – to start producing their pieces. These had to be delivered to the editors-in-chief through the medium deemed appropriate, with WhatsApp being the choice of all the teams. They would then publish the news at the time established in the rundown. The interval between the publication of the news items was determined by each of the teams, with a five-minute interval being the standard duration. This was necessary because, as the class sessions lasted an hour and a half, it was necessary to adjust the time. In addition to the news item itself, each pair of reporters sent a series of hashtags that would help to disseminate their work more effectively.

4. Results

Following the completion of the information practice on TikTok, the results obtained from the 118 responses were as follows:

**Figure 1.** Students' experience of TikTok news reporting practice
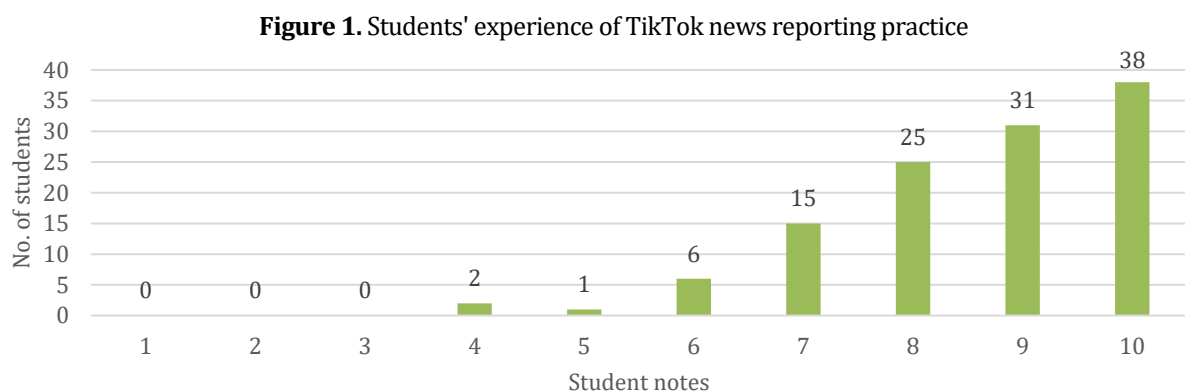
Source: own elaboration.

The response to the internship was overwhelmingly positive, with an average score of 8.5 points. Of the students who participated in the survey, only two considered the experience to be unsatisfactory, awarding it a mark of 4. The remaining 116 students awarded the experience a minimum of 5 points, with the grade of outstanding being the most abundant (69 students, 58.5%). The Bs accounted for 33.9% of the marks, with

40 students achieving this grade. The pass mark was attained by 5.9% of students, with 7 students achieving this grade.

Figure 2 illustrates the variation in students' perception of TikTok as an instrument for transmitting journalistic information before and after the internship.

Figure 2. Variation in students' perception of TikTok as an information tool
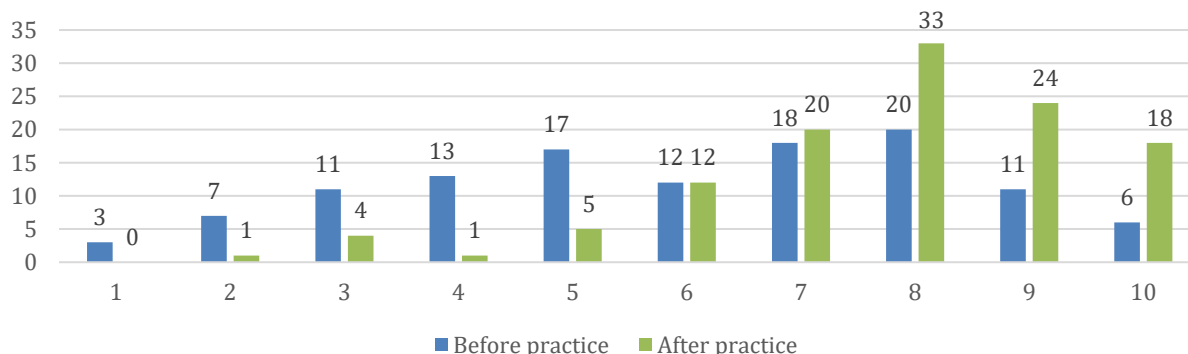
Source: own elaboration.

Figure 2 illustrates that the average score assigned to this platform as a means of distributing information prior to the practical exercise in class was 5.9 points. Of the students surveyed, 34% considered TikTok to be an ineffective tool for transmitting journalistic information, with marks ranging from 1 to 4 points.

Conversely, 84 students (71.2%) considered TikTok to be a potentially effective tool for generating news, although they expressed reservations. 24.6% of respondents rated it as average, with scores of 5 or 6 points, while 32.2% awarded it a B grade and 14.4% considered it to be an excellent tool for this purpose. Following the completion of the proposed practice, the students' perceptions underwent a significant transformation.

As illustrated in the accompanying graph, the students' perception of TikTok's ability to distribute information content varies after the practice. The average score given by the respondents is 7.75 points, representing a 1.85-point increase compared to the pre-exercise average.

It is noteworthy that only 7.4% of the total 118 students failed the application question. This represents a difference of 21.4 percentage points compared to their perception before doing the practice. In other words, of the 34 students who did not consider TikTok to be a good journalistic tool, 82.35% of them changed their opinion after doing the exercise.

The B grade, awarded by 53 students (44.9% of the total), is the majority grade, increasing by 12.7%. The "outstanding" grade was awarded by 42 students, representing 35.6% of the total number of respondents. This represents an increase of 21.2% compared to the number of students who received this grade before the exercise.

In the case of the pass mark, the results show that 14.4% of the votes were cast, which represents a reduction of 10.2% in comparison to the assessment given by the students prior to the placement. This is therefore a significant change in assessment, which tends towards a more favourable perception of TikTok by students.

Figure 3. Consideration of TikTok as a news dissemination platform for journalistic purposes
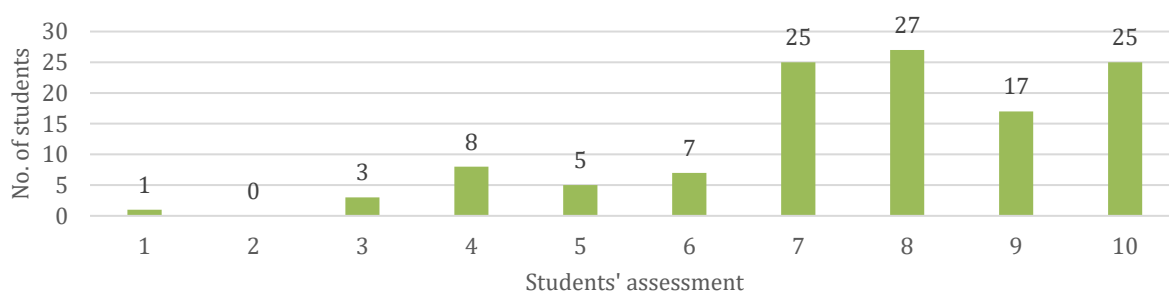
Source: own elaboration.

With regard to the assessment of TikTok as a news dissemination platform, the mean score obtained by the students was 7.66, which is comparable to that obtained following the internship. A total of 10.1% of the students failed the tool, with 12 students in this category. Another 10.1% of the respondents considered it to be good, resulting in a mean score of 7.66. Conversely, 52 students (44.1%) awarded the tool a grade of "B", while 42 students (35.6%) gave it an "A". These results are comparable to those obtained in the evaluation of the social network, with a marginal increase of 2.7% for TikTok as a journalistic platform. Another question posed after this practice inquired about the narrative style of TikTok in disseminating news. The results obtained are presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Rating of TikTok's style and tone for reporting news stories
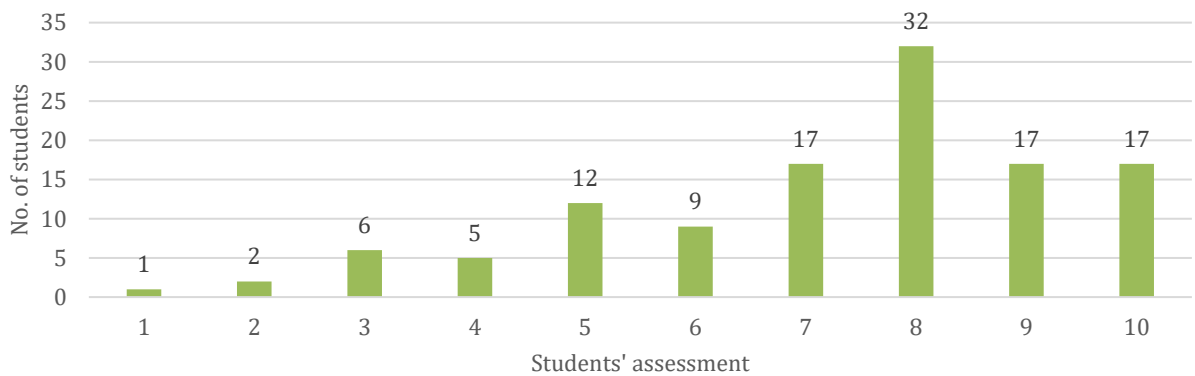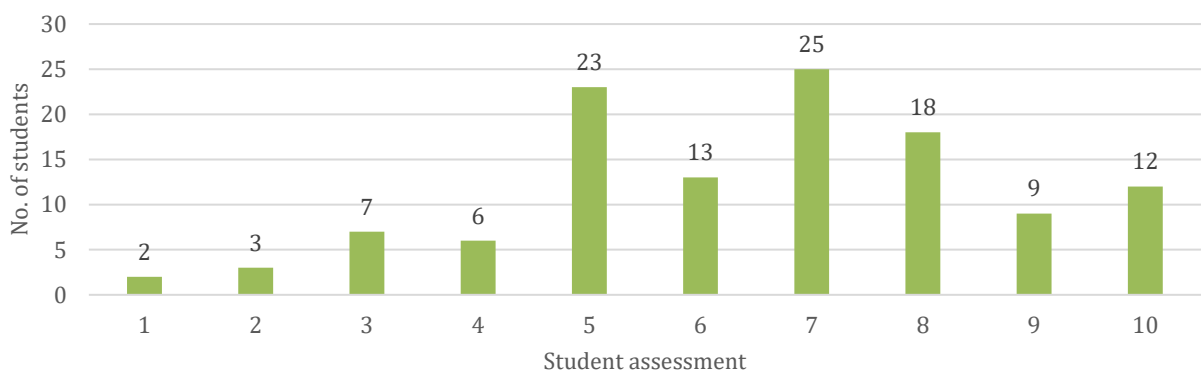

Source: own elaboration.

The content created for TikTok exhibits a markedly distinct style and tone when compared to other platforms or media. In this context, students have posited that this form of storytelling can be compelling when applied to journalism. The mean score assigned to this platform by the students is 7.25. A total of 28.8% of the respondents (34 students) rated this method of storytelling as outstanding, 41.5% considered it to be a remarkable approach, 17.8% gave it a pass mark, and 11.8% (14 students) deemed it to be an ineffective method of transmitting journalistic information.

With regard to the utilisation of elements such as stickers and GIFs, the mean score obtained for the evaluation of their use is 6.5 points. This represents the lowest score awarded by students in the proposed exercise.

Figure 5. Results of a study on the effectiveness of using stickers or GIFs to convey journalistic information on the social media platform TikTok.

Source: own elaboration.

As previously stated, the students' evaluation of the application's own elements is the least favourable. 17.8% of respondents consider the inclusion of these elements to be highly positive, 36.5% rate their use as notable, 30.5% consider the use of these elements to be acceptable, and finally, 15.2% of those surveyed do not approve of the integration of GIFs or stickers.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The results of the surveys indicate that the TikTok news reporting practice has been a great success. The students gave the exercise a high average grade, and their comments were positive, i.e., "it has been the most different and interesting practice I have done this year. Thank you very much for proposing innovative practices focused on the new possibilities that are emerging thanks to the advance of technologies"; "A very innovative practice" and "I would never have considered using this platform in a professional way, and now I even see it as a way to make myself known".

This illustrates the need for internships utilising platforms such as TikTok or similar, as students frequently request that teachers adopt a more holistic approach to education. Journalism is a degree that facilitates innovation due to the advent of new information and communication technologies. One of the students who participated in the internship asserted that this exercise was "a highly promising and original approach to learning journalism in the classroom." He further stated, "I am consistently in favor of hands-on learning, which has been notably absent in the degree curriculum."

In light of the ever-changing media landscape, it is imperative for educators to engage with the content their students consume and collaborate with them to identify the most effective ways to convey journalistic information.

Initially, students tend to exhibit a certain degree of aversion to the utilisation of novel communication platforms, such as TikTok, as conduits for the dissemination of journalistic information. Their engagement with these platforms is predominantly for recreational and entertainment purposes, and they are largely unaware of the potential applications they offer for other uses. They tend to hold the perception that anything outside the traditional media is not truthful or is not pure journalism. This is likely a consequence of the current curricula, which appear to prioritize classical media over new platforms. However, once students engage with both the tool's capabilities and their own, their perspectives shift. This type of practice is therefore highly suitable for students to recognize that, as illustrated in this paper, journalism can—and should—utilize all media to disseminate news in the most effective manner for its audience.

The journalism students' perception of TikTok as a news tool varies by 1.85 points after the internship. It goes from an average score of 5.9 to 7.75 points. Initially, the students were not very reluctant to consider this platform as a future job possibility. However, when they discovered the possibilities offered by this social network, their way of understanding information content changed. Some of the comments made by the students go in that direction. One student indicated that "I thought it was an interesting practice, especially in terms of making it clear that journalism can be done on Tiktok - which can create jobs for young people". Another student indicated that she was not a regular user, and "I didn't know the platform very well before doing the internship, which has allowed me to change my opinion about it, as it can be a very interesting tool in the field of journalism".

When students are asked about their consideration of TikTok as a platform for disseminating journalistic content, the average mark obtained is very similar to that given for their opinion of the application after doing the practical. In this case, the score is 7.66, which represents less than a tenth of a point difference. This discrepancy can be attributed to the fact that while a few students' opinions of the social network as a news distributor have improved following their engagement with it, a significant proportion of students still perceive it as an unsuitable platform for this purpose.

The resulting news pieces were, in general, of a high standard. Having familiarity with the narrative possibilities of this social network, the students adapted to the tone and style of the platform. The use of elements such as filters and stickers allowed them to tell the stories in a more entertaining way than traditional television news.

However, despite the fact that the students' assessment of these elements was above a pass mark, the perception of their use was not as good as the overall result of the practice. The students believe that, to some extent, they can mislead the user who consumes these contents. One of the comments made after the internship indicated that "the use of music and stickers, basic to TikTok, have clearly subjective connotations, which directly clashes with the way in which a news event should be treated".

Conversely, despite the greater number of positive evaluations, some students express reservations about the informational value of TikTok in comparison to traditional media, such as television, radio, or print. One respondent noted that he was initially surprised by the potential of this platform as a source of information. He acknowledged the following: "Although it is true that on television, a news item is

also presented in 60-70 seconds, I do not view it as a substitute for TV." Another student commented "I believe that from a journalistic perspective, the platform is capable of providing information that can be complex yet simplified and delivered in a more expedient manner. It is an effective medium for obtaining information about current affairs, although it lacks the depth of other media such as the press or radio."

One of the most frequently cited concerns is that, as one student notes, "the media tend to hire individuals who adhere to traditional norms to oversee their social media platforms, despite the fact that young people are the most active users of these platforms, particularly TikTok." Consequently, it is imperative that future journalists receive training at the university level to enable them to connect with the diverse audiences of various communication platforms.

In terms of the suitability of TikTok's narrative style for transmitting journalistic information, although the average mark awarded is 7.25, which equates to a B-, this is the question on which most students failed the platform, with 14 marks below 5, after completing the practical. Another student expressed the opinion that "journalism cannot be practised in a normal way, as the fact of informing competes with the fact of entertaining".

Despite some negative comments, the majority of responses, both about the practice and the experience with this social network, are positive. Journalism students emphasise the fact that they perceive this platform as aimed at a young audience. One respondent states, "TikTok is much more dynamic and reaches young people more easily." It is therefore a social network that can be used to inform a younger audience that is reluctant to use traditional media. Moreover, the content has the potential to reach a large number of users due to its ability to go viral.

Its particularities are especially suitable for creating short informative pieces that introduce a topic which can later be complemented in another medium. Therefore, it can become a fundamental tool in a transmedia strategy aimed at a young audience who are beginning to take an interest in staying informed. For this to happen, it is essential that content creators use language appropriate for their target audience, hiring young journalists who are familiar with current communication codes, thus more effectively achieving their goals.

The characteristics of TikTok such as brevity, interactivity, originality, and virality, make it an ideal tool for journalism students to experiment with different formats, genres, and journalistic styles. This allows them to broaden their skills and their vision of journalism and social networks. Furthermore, it allows them to develop critical and creative thinking, as they are required to produce original pieces and tell them in less than a minute. This implied that they had to summarize the news in a concise and relevant manner, ensuring that no pertinent information was omitted, while adhering to the conventions of this social network. Furthermore, this tool enables them to remain apprised of prevailing trends, issues, and the demands of contemporary society, thereby enabling them to adapt their content to the needs and interests of their potential audience.

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