Laura Pérez Rastrilla
Pablo Sapag M.
Armando Recio García *Editors*

Fast Politics

Propaganda in the Age of TikTok

Springer

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Editors
Laura Pérez Rastrilla 🆔
Department of Journalism and Global
Communication
Complutense University of Madrid
Madrid, Spain

Pablo Sapag M. 🆔
Department of Journalism and Global
Communication
Complutense University of Madrid
Madrid, Spain

Armando Recio García
Department of Journalism and Global
Communication
Complutense University of Madrid
Madrid, Spain

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Preface

From 2020 to 2022 the social network TikTok was the most downloaded social media app. It went from 54 million active users in 2018 to 1 billion in 2022, a figure that should be added to the 700 million users of the Chinese version, Douyin. TikTok ranks as the 6th largest platform on the internet, already surpassing Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram.

TikTok has also become the most addictive platform (Zeng, Abidin & Schäfer, 2021; Marengo et al., 2022). During 2022 alone, TikTok was at the top of the apps in which users spend the most time, toppling those that traditionally led this ranking: Facebook and YouTube (We are social and Hootsuite, 2023). Users spend an average of 95 minutes a day and 90% of them access the app daily. Likewise, TikTok is the platform with the highest user participation (Geyser, 2022; Aslam, 2022). Among this social network's users, 57% affirm that since they downloaded the app they watch less television and content from streaming services (We are social, 2022).

TikTok ranks as the second social network with the highest ROI index—Return on Investment (Faria, 2023). This is due to its high frequency of publication and to the fact that it's the network with the highest registered engagement, still trending upward. These characteristics make it very attractive as a marketing channel (Cucu, 2022). The model of videos that follow one another without any break has dramatically revolutionized the social network landscape. In 2019, Instagram copied TikTok's formula, adding the "reels" function that offers the possibility of posting short videos. In 2021, YouTube followed suit and incorporated YouTube Shorts. On those same days, Netflix launched Short Laughs, a service that offers short clips—about 30 s—of movies in a series that follow one another in a chain simulating the TikTok screen.

The platform, launched worldwide in 2018, was initially oriented towards a young audience between puberty and late adolescence i.e., many (perhaps most) of its users being minors. Young people used the social network to record videos in which they danced in an informal, spontaneous way, pretending to sing or proposing and fulfilling challenges. It was entertaining content, trivial and without continuity, characteristics determined by the platform's nature. Thus, although this type of content added to the age range of the majority of its users, it did not attract the attention of institutions

or political parties. In other words, it seemed to be a superficial and irrelevant social network, useless as a tool to achieve political goals… or maybe not.

The global COVID-19 pandemic was decisive in increasing its user base thanks to TikTok's initial appeal as an entertainment platform ready to fill up the additional spare time as a result of the health emergency. However, the 2022 data show that TikTok has been more than able to take advantage of that momentum to continue growing in a normal context. This unexpected development has been a key consideration in its current positive assessment by institutions and political actors, who finally followed those business corporations that have been present on it since the very birth of the platform.

In a clear break with the initial trend when the highest percentage of users were underage adolescents, currently 43% are between 18 and 24 years of age, followed by an extraordinary and still growing 32% of users between 25 and 34 years old (We are social and Hootsuite, 2023). The addition of hundreds of millions of new users and its extension to a young-adult audience, have forced political leaders, parties, and institutions to focus their attention on TikTok. Its particularities, that initially led to contempt, are perceived today as its greatest strengths when compared to other social networks.

Thus TikTok, that continues to be the most popular network among adolescents and young adults, has become an excellent channel to reach an age group characterized by demobilization, mistrust, and a lack of interest in politics. Accordingly, no other platform offers the possibility for political actors to target potential voters like TikTok does.

Among the first accounts from official institutions was that of the International Federation of the Red Cross (May 29, 2019), the WHO (February 28, 2020), UNICEF (May 8, 2020), and some Chinese state institutions (2018). They quickly realized its potential and began to use the network with the aim of launching social awareness campaigns, especially health content during the pandemic, mainly to reach young audiences not overly worried about the virus. Although it is especially popular in Latin America and Asia, there are currently countless TikTok accounts of political figures from all around the world: the President of France, Emmanuel Macron; the Italian prime minister, Giorgia Meloni; the president of El Salvador, Najib Bukele; the president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador; his chancellor, Marcelo Ebrard; the Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates, Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum; Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel; and Pushpa Kamal Dahal, Prime Minister of Nepal; among many others.

Little by little, TikTok is overcoming its initial stigma, something that is also noticeable in the profiles of content creators and in the interest it arouses in academia. However, its sudden and unexpected growth means that research on this social network, and especially on the political content that is distributed within it, is still very scarce. This book is intended to be one of the first steps towards studying a platform that has broken all the forecasts, becoming one of the most popular social networks.

The first part of the book presents a general approach to this TikTok phenomenon from three different but complementary points of views. In the Chap. 1,

Pablo Sapag M., Laura Pérez Rastrilla, and Armando Recio García present the state of the art, analysing scientific studies about TikTok published up to December 2022, identifying trends in the consideration of the platform as a political communication tool. The results show how the attention of academics has been focused on three different dimensions. The first one is the use of TikTok as a new platform to promote candidates in the framework of electoral campaigns. Second, TikTok as a platform exploited by social movements searching for new adhesions or as a uniting vehicle and instrument to coordinate activists' concrete actions. Finally, there is concern about the use of TikTok as a disruptive device on the international scene and how its growing use in hegemonic states' narratives is leading to increasing tensions. A shared characteristic in the case studies is the general absence, at least until now, of political actors' adaptation to the new codes of use that characterize TikTok as a singular platform. The authors encourage paying attention not only to its evolution to find out if this usage transformation actually occurs, but also to analyse how it affects the way political communication is done, and therefore political action itself.

Paolo Gerbaudo and Iago Moreno venture precisely into the latter field. In the Chap. 2 they reflect on the way in which the use of TikTok's specific codes can influence political communication. In this still young social network, the body in motion forms the core of disseminated content, placing it at the centre of the political battlefield. This corporeality is read as a reflection of Generation Z's spirit, especially identified with TikTok. Despite the declared intention of the platform to position itself as a mere resource for entertainment, political actors have not ignored its potential and thus their presence in the network has steadily grown. With this added factor, the body appears as the articulator of political messages, as a means to reproduce memes and as the vehicle to establish an emotional bond between political figures and their followers. Gerbaudo and Moreno stress that unlike other social networks, TikTok displays the body from a double dimension. On the one hand, as an intentional act. On the other, as the result of a spontaneous and authentic performance. These two characteristics could reshape political communication at a time of alienation, detachment, and distrust towards traditional politics.

In the Chap. 3 of this first part, political communication analyst and advisor Ana Salazar dissects the TikTok phenomenon in a context in which social networks have become accepted media for the consumption of information. In this sense, the platform is the most extreme example of those two concepts of "politainment" and scrolling politics. In social networks, the ease of creating content and distributing a message virally entails the difficulty of standing out among torrents of information. TikTok, however, makes numerous communication tools easily available to political actors, such as narrative techniques or emotional elements to attract users' attention in a highly competitive arena. Knowing the technical aspects of TikTok and the profile of users, the author unravels some of the keys to success, warning, however, that the malleability of social networks facilitating communication also explains why they are also so easily exploited for manipulative purposes.

Four years after its global launch, TikTok's effects as a disruptor of the political arena have exceeded expectations. As shown in the case studies analysed in the following sections, the platform is playing a central role in the configuration of new

ways of doing political communication as well as in the political decision-making process itself. Among others, it can be observed in the political practices of India, Bangladesh, the United States, Ecuador, and various European countries.

In Chap. 4, Ratan Kumar Roy and Ahana Choudhury decipher the flow of political messages on the platform that oscillate between the redefinition of politics, resistance, subversion, and its instrumentalization when reproducing the real world. Through case studies of India and Bangladesh, the authors examine the phenomenon of digitized politics, in which TikTok plays an important role and from which some political actors obtain benefits even without participating in the network themselves. Roy and Choudhury reflect on how political discourses cross the platform, where and when they go viral and become relevant factors for increasing the popularity of some politicians, and how they themselves are also transformed. Given the affordability and uses of TikTok, humour, music, satire, and the TikTokers' own bodies are presented as resources to exercise power in new forms of participation and political criticism from what have become spaces of virtual populism. This face of the social network coexists with the business dimension of the platform and with the risk that the performative simply passes from the physical world to the digital one, as has happened in other media and social networks. Thus, the platform can end up being a mere reproduction of power structures or even aggravate and reaffirm conflicts, a point where we can situate measures such as restricting or banning the network.

In Chap. 5, Young Joon Lim and Lynse Larance Guerra address the problems of misinformation and disinformation associated with TikTok's contents. They do so by analysing the case of the United States, paying special attention to the 2020 presidential elections. Virtually since its launch, the use of the network has been classified in the United States as a matter of internal security. In the debate that has arisen, positions have oscillated between considering it as a Trojan horse inside the United States political model or prioritizing the freedom of users to consume and of the company to carry out its business. The authors also discuss the changing positions and contradictory use of the internet by US politicians. The TikTok algorithm generates addictive behaviour, in addition to creating a sophisticated echo chamber. Thus, this network has become part of the US public agenda, giving rise to a debate in which politicians move between fear of the effect that the intrusion of propaganda messages by foreign powers could generate, and exasperation at the possibility of losing the opportunity to exploit it for their own purposes.

María Claudia Rivera Prado and Kevin Lupiciano Barreto Coello examine in Chap. 6 the TikTok communication strategies of both presidential candidates during the 2021 Ecuadorian elections: Andrés Arauz and Guillermo Lasso. The timing of the presidential contest took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a key factor in understanding the efforts of both communication teams to stand out online. The study is carried out through a combined methodology. The authors take into account a series of numerical indicators such as the frequency of publication, engagement, the number of followers, and the duration of the videos, among others. Textual indicators such as hashtags or narrative axes have also been considered in order to perform content analysis. The results indicate that Guillermo Lasso's trust in TikTok for the second round of the elections was decisive for his victory. His

message reached voters that the candidate could not have disseminated in other ways, especially to the younger cohorts. He did it through emotional and humorous narratives, two elements inherent in the platform's codes.

The possibility of targeting groups that do not use other social networks nor consume traditional media is one of the most powerful characteristics of TikTok as an instrument for political communication. However, the platform also emerges as an alternative medium in which to distribute a message that would be difficult to spread through other channels. Along these lines, some authors suggest that there is a close relationship between social networks and populism (Engesser et al., 2017; Gerbaudo, 2018). Data shows that populist movements and parties not only obtain more successful results in the use of social networks than other parties, but also that among the populist parties themselves the benefits are greater when communication campaigns are supported by social networks than when traditional channels are used (Ernst, Esser, Blassing & Engesser, 2018; Aruguete, Calvo & Ventura, 2021; Bracciale, Andretta & Martella, 2021). In addition, the success of the messages does not depend so much on the opening of an (apparent) dialogue with the audience, but on the possibility of polarizing the debate, the presence of hyper-leadership, and/or simplifying the message. Towards that end, analysis of the accounts of parties or far-right political figures in Italy, Germany, and Spain are presented in three distinct chapters.

In Chap. 7, Laura Cervi and Santiago Tejedor assess the effectiveness of TikTok for far-right movements by examining the case of Matteo Salvini, vice president of the Italian Council of Ministers and leader of the far-right party La Lega. They reach interesting conclusions by analysing the comments to the content he published. The researchers discover that a majority of users rejected the politician. Surprisingly, however, these results do not negate some benefits in the use of social networks to spread the message of the extreme right.

In the first place, the comments reveal the absence of political debate, even discussion among users, who are limited to individually expressing their love or hatred towards the politician in a fandom style reaction, without referring to any specific political issue. Thus, the results of the innovative research by Cervi and Tejedor indicate a tendency to trivialize political issues, giving rise to forms of political information consumption known as pop politics or "politainment." In addition to the superficial approach to the political debate associated with TikTok, a second outstanding contribution of this study is the reason for the rejection of the far-right politician. The repudiation, as manifested in comments, is not due to his political ideology, but rather involves intergenerational tension, as the bulk of users who comment consider that a space intended for younger users and for purposes other than political communication has been invaded.

In the Chap. 8 of the book Marcus Bösch examines the advantages that German political parties obtain by incorporating TikTok into their communication strategies. He does so through a comparative analysis between the accounts of three well-known political figures belonging to the liberal FDP party, the socialist SPD, and the far-right AfD party. The accounts of the first two are characterized by an effort to adhere to TikTok codes and by following what are considered to be the formulae

for succeeding on the platform. They published entertaining content, resorting to humour, dancing, and participating in challenges. In contrast to this strategy, the AfD politician intentionally resisted adopting the platform's own formats. However, he is this one who managed to dominate the political debate and place the party on the public agenda as a regular topic.

Among the factors of success, Bösch identifies first of all the massive presence of AfD supporters, militants, and members on the platform who do not always identify themselves as such and who echo the party's speeches and proposals. Second, the refusal to follow the specific codes of TikTok has the purpose of projecting themselves as more pure, authentic, and genuine politicians compared to those who pay communication consultants or PR agencies. Last, the author refers to false accounts, some of them identified by Bösch during his investigation, dedicated to amplifying the party's narratives.

The book's last research chapter by Andrea Castro-Martínez, José Luis Torres-Martín, and Pablo Díaz-Morilla, analyses the TikTok account of Vox, a far-right, Spanish political party. The results of their investigation indicate that the party managed to obtain positive results from its activity on the platform. The communication experts interviewed for their study provided interesting reflections on the functions of social networks. In addition to the aforementioned possibility of reaching a young audience, normally indifferent to conventional media, social networks serve as a strategy to overcome the filters of other media. The flexibility of these networks makes it possible to circulate certain messages, residual or initially rejected by conventional media, to magnify them and exaggerate their importance. Thus, these media end up including political personalities and messages in their agenda. Regarding the analysis of Vox's account, despite identifying some successes in the definition of its target audience and form of the messages, the party does not show a planned, coherent strategy or one adapted to the environment of social networks to take advantage of their full potential.

Overall, then, the success of TikTok is indisputable and consequently political actors continue to explore its possibilities as a vehicle for political propaganda. The continuous upward trend of the platform demands of communication professionals and academics to closely follow its evolution, observe users' behaviour, and study the effects on public affairs.

This young social platform synthesizes specific characteristics of the rest of the social networks, thus posing challenges from the point of view of communication and issues related to the impact on user's behaviour. On TikTok's videos the body is central. It is also a body in continuous movement, where the vibrating image is usually accompanied by text, sound, emoticons, and hashtags—in short, an excess of stimuli condensed in seconds. TikTok perfectly capitalizes on the Goldfish effect, in reference to the term that describes the continued decline in the attention span of humans and which, according to a popular study (Microsoft Attention Spanns, 2015), stands at eight seconds, one below the one with a Goldfish. It is illustrative of the meaning of this data that although the platform allows videos of up to ten minutes, the recipe for success prescribes not exceeding 30 s.

Based on these data and the initial consequences exposed in the chapters of this book regarding the use of the social network in the political field, several questions arise that entail broadening the research field. To what degree will politics projected through an explosively growing network like TikTok be influenced and transformed by the platform's own characteristics: extreme brevity, simplification, spectacularization, multiple stimuli, and superficiality? Precisely to avoid all of the above, would politicians and politics itself be able to shape TikTok so that the videos move closer to the ten minutes that the platform allows in order to enlarge the public debate, including all the nuances of a discussion that by its essence does not admit for simple answers? The chapters of this book focusing on the history of the making of a new but also unexpected political and media communication tool, offer some preliminary conclusions that further research can deepen. The close relationship between political communication and TikTok is already a fact, but the evolution of that alliance and its consequences remains unknown.

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                                                                                                              Pablo Sapag M.

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Editors and Contributors

About the Editors

Laura Pérez Rastrilla works as Lecturer in History of Mass Communication at Complutense University of Madrid. Her main research interests focus on the study of propaganda, the media's coverage during armed conflicts, and the representation of political campaigns in the media. She has held visiting fellowships in Rjeka, Moscow, Brussels, and Ljubljana.

Dr. Pablo Sapag M. is an Associate Professor at Complutense University of Madrid. He is the author of *Syria in Perspective* and other books and articles on the Syrian crisis. He has published on the media and propaganda, and is also a contributor to the Sage Encyclopaedia of War. He has lectured in British, European, and Latin American universities, regularly contributing to international media.

Armando Recio García Ph.D. in Information Sciences. He graduated in Journalism and is a specialist in Communication and Political Management. He works as Lecturer in History of Propaganda, History of Social Communication, and Political Communication and Propaganda at the Complutense University of Madrid. He co-leads the course "Political Communication and Electoral Campaigns" at the Complutense Summer School.

Contributors

Marcus Bösch HAW Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany

Andrea Castro-Martínez University of Málaga, Málaga, Spain

Laura Cervi Department of Journalism and Communication Sciences, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

Ahana Choudhury Department of Sociology, Tezpur University, Tezpur, India

Kevin Lupiciano Barreto Coello Lay University Eloy Alfaro of Manabí, Manabí, Ecuador

Pablo Díaz-Morilla University of Málaga, Málaga, Spain;
EADE University and University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Málaga, Spain

Armando Recio García Department of Journalism and Global Communication, Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain

Paolo Gerbaudo Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, Italy

Lynse Larance Guerra SGR Law Firm, Texas, USA

Young Joon Lim Department of Communication, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Texas, USA

Pablo Sapag M. Department of Journalism and Global Communication, Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain

Iago Moreno Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona, Spain

María Claudia Rivera Prado Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador, Portoviejo, Ecuador

Laura Pérez Rastrilla Department of Journalism and Global Communication, Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain

Ratan Kumar Roy School of General Education, BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Ana Salazar Head Manager of Idus3 Estrategia Política, Tomares (Sevilla), CP, Spain

Santiago Tejedor Department of Journalism and Communication Sciences, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

José Luis Torres-Martín University of Málaga, Málaga, Spain

Part I
Research on the Making: New Codes for Political Communication

Chapter 1
TikTok: New Media, Old Propaganda—State of the Art and Possibilities for Political Communication

Pablo Sapag M., Laura Pérez Rastrilla [iD], and Armando Recio García

1.1 Introduction

The use of TikTok as a political communication tool is a recent phenomenon with research on the issue emerging. The potential of TikTok as an institutional communication tool started to become apparent in 2020. Although some international organisations, such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies or the FAO, had accounts since 2019, the shift in perception towards the platform and its widespread use in the field was triggered by the COVID pandemic crisis.

On the one hand, it prompted the search for any channel that would be useful to reach the greatest number of people to provide vital information. Thus, in February and March respectively, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations launched their TikTok accounts with videos explaining measures to prevent infection. On the other hand, periods of lockdown boosted the use of entertainment platforms and TikTok became the most downloaded app globally during this period, with 82 million downloads (Bellan, 2020). It has continued to top the rankings in subsequent years (Koetsier, 2023) and has grown from 800 million users in 2019 to 2.5 billion (including Douyin) in 2022 (We are social & Hootsuite, 2021, 2023. From 2020, when it was the fourth platform in the number of hours users spent on it—13.3 h per month—it has moved to first place in 2022, with 23 h and 28 min

P. Sapag M. · L. P. Rastrilla (✉) · A. R. García
Department of Journalism and Global Communication, Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain
e-mail: lprastrilla@ucm.es

P. Sapag M.
e-mail: pvsapag@pdi.ucm.es

A. R. García
e-mail: armrecio@ucm.es

per month, ahead of YouTube that until 2021 had led all platforms (We are social & Hootsuite, 2022, 2023).

The earlier dismissal of TikTok as a social medium for the distribution of political propaganda (Vijay & Gekker, 2021) changed with its unexpected exponential rise. The increased political and institutional activity occurred at the same time as the platform began to promote itself in spaces aimed at broad audiences, such as sporting events or as the sponsorship of sports celebrities (Sciba, 2022; Su et al., 2020). Such events include the Eurovision music contest or major sporting tournaments widely followed on television, such as the women's European Football Championship or the Six Nations rugby tournament (Short Thoughts, 2022). It thus broadened its sphere of visibility and influence, leaving behind its initial association with mainly youth audiences. Around the same time, well-known commercial brands targeting broad, adult audiences started to use TikTok to diversify their advertising campaigns (Guarda, et al., 2021; Winzer et al., 2022). From that moment on, it was only a matter of time before political actors stepped up their use for persuasive purposes, as had previously happened with YouTube, Facebook or Instagram (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Ricke, 2014; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). A different case is Twitter that from the start was conceived as a social medium for adults to participate in political discussion (López Abellán, 2013).

In addition to international organisations which used the platform for institutional communication, other purely political actors, such as political parties, public officials and candidates opened their accounts on TikTok. The institutional use of the platform contributed to legitimising it as a respected communication channel for dealing with public issues, thus softening the initial label of a social medium for leisure-oriented purposes and limited to young people and influencers (Jennings, 2019). One of the first to join was the Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, who has participated on the platform since late 2019. French President Emmanuel Macron and El Salvador President Nayib Bukele have had accounts since 2020. In 2023, political actors on TikTok is no longer perceived as an exception: presidents, ministers, parliamentarians, political parties, as well as embassies or state institutions, have accounts on TikTok.

The platform has also been a key player in some political campaigns, as in the case of the 2022 presidential elections in Colombia. A candidate virtually unknown to Colombians, Rodolfo Fernández, managed to get through to the second round after a campaign run exclusively on social media, in which TikTok played a leading role (Castro & EFE, 2022). That same year, the Italian general elections were partly played out on TikTok. The current prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, made some of her most controversial but popular appearances there to ask for votes (Agenzia VISTA/ Jakhnagiev/Corriere Tv, 2022). Also in 2022 during Brazil's presidential elections, social media were so ubiquitous that some media outlets opened sections dedicated to analysing the election campaign from a social media perspective (Estadão, 2022). TikTok became an accurate barometer of the election outcome (Furtado, 2022; Lima, 2022).