

**This program was brought to you by the
algorithm: rethinking television via TikTok**

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This program was brought to you by the algorithm: rethinking television via TikTok

Abstract

The days of television have repeatedly been deemed over. Today, we are told, television is a dying medium replaced by viral and new digital platforms like TikTok where millions gather every day to consume content. This paper is an extended literature review of television and TikTok scholarship to highlight similarities and differences amongst key concepts in both fields. By focusing on political economy, textual analysis, and audience/reception studies, we unpack the connections and tensions between TikTok and the visual styles, aesthetic elements, cultural configurations, intertextual references, and genre formations that have established television as a recognizable technology and cultural form. We also draw on a case study of TikTok therapy content and television talk shows to further demonstrate how these entities occur. Moreover, the paper outlines the analytical benefits of considering digital platforms such as TikTok as a continuity of prior media developments, rather than being fundamental disruptions.

Keywords: TikTok, social media, television, media change, remediation, political economy, textual analysis, audience studies

Introduction

The days of television have repeatedly been deemed over, replaced by the virality of attention-grabbing platforms like TikTok. However, television keeps escaping its proclaimed death of cultural relevance (Morley, 2022). Moreover, key elements of televisual broadcasting culture have been remediated on “new” digital platforms like TikTok and others today (Bolter & Grusin, 1999; Firth & Marinelli 2025).

This essay serves as a literature review of extant television and TikTok/social media scholarship to address this tension by discussing the parallels between the two. Through a lens of political economy, textual analysis, and reception studies, this paper argues TikTok and television are more interconnected than is currently acknowledged. As such, it addresses gaps with a focused discussion on the similarities and differences between the two media forms.

Understanding the links between both, TikTok and television, is crucial for grasping the present shifts that TikTok exemplifies in the media landscape (Kaye et al., 2022; Stokel-Walker, 2021; Su, 2023). We highlight the intersections between TikTok and television’s characteristic commercial logics, cultural configurations, intertextual references, genre formations, and aesthetic elements (Caldwell, 1995; Smythe, 1981; Williams, 1974).

Furthermore, we acknowledge the significance of televisual media forms in shaping socio-cultural experiences around the globe (Caldwell, 2025; Hill, 2018). By grounding our approach in this acknowledgement, we are curious to explore new ways of making sense of contemporary media cultures. In particular, we are interested in better articulating the similarities and differences that “new” media have to the profound form of television broadcasting (Gitelman, 2008).

The scope of our endeavour here is, of course, necessarily limited. We cannot provide a comprehensive analysis of all the “new” media and platforms that have intersected with television in such dynamic ways that constitute their constant state of flux. And many types of platforms have, of course, already been extensively discussed in the literature - for example, in relation to subscription-based streaming services like Netflix (Lotz, 2022) or video-sharing platforms like YouTube (Burgess and Green, 2009).

We specifically focus on TikTok to examine how televisual concepts and experiences are given form on the short-form video app. Such concepts revolve around similarities and difference in the experience of flow; how genre formation and aesthetic styles are adapted around such an experience; how serialisation, audience engagement, and emotional realism are prioritized in content creation; and how audiences experience TikTok socially, akin to television, through co-consumption and background viewing.

By reviewing scholarship on TikTok, this paper thus aims to provide a concentrated macro-analytical view of these intersections, building on and extending previous discussions on the TikTok-TV intersection. We start with a general discussion of the context between the supposed decline of television and the rise of online platforms like TikTok. Then, drawing on Kellner’s (2011) three-pronged approach to cultural analysis, we engage with TikTok’s dimensions of political economy (production), text, and reception. Our textual analysis section is, furthermore, buttressed by a brief case study of original research to explore these parallels. We close with future directions for research to explore these dynamics and ways in which we can develop a richer understanding of platforms like TikTok today.

Background

Television is, arguably, the most central medium of the 20th century (Morley, 2022). No other medium in the past century has had such a profound impact on shaping the fabric of

social experience (Spigel, 1992; Williams, 1974). Scholars have discussed this impact in relation to changes in the television medium itself over the last decades. Factors discussed here include, for example, the emergence of a “bedroom culture” of individual viewing (Livingstone and Bovill, 1999), enhanced abilities of viewers to determine their own schedules (Uricchio, 2004), or the proliferation of television programmes and channels for viewers to choose from (Lotz, 2014).

All these factors have profoundly re-shaped television’s role in shaping socio-cultural experiences, moving away from previous theorisations of a broadcasting culture (Williams, 1974) and the distinct ways in which it organised public (Scannell, 1989) and private spheres (Silverstone, 1994). In parallel, changes in the media landscape itself have challenged the dominant position that television occupied as a defining medium (Livingstone, 1999). This has largely been driven by the emergence of online platforms like Netflix, YouTube, or nowadays TikTok, concentrating the attention of viewers in new ways (Webster, 2016).

Studying what’s “new” is thus vital. But research on the permanence of media also reminds us to see the “new” in connection to the “old” (Boczkowski et al., 2022; Thorburn & Jenkins, 2003). Additionally, moments of global crisis have accentuated television’s significance (Morley, 2022). The same can be said of TikTok, which, like television, saw (re)newed interest during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns (Kendall, 2021) as people re-anchored their lives around the television (Johnson and Dempsey, 2020).

Various studies on TikTok have drawn on television and related scholarship in the last years. Most prominently, scholars have engaged with the idea of “flow” (Williams, 1974). Flow is considered one of the defining characteristics of broadcast television, as it is through the scheduling of “an evening’s viewing” (Williams, 2004: 93) that broadcasters can capture, and subsequently retain, audiences. In this original conception, flow referred to the sequencing of

programmes scheduled in such a way to overcome their individual nature. Here, studies have set out to theorise TikTok's "For You" page and its consumption as such a flow experience, as the engagement with not individual pieces of content but an amalgamation of sounds and images into one unified object (Faltese et al., 2023; Firth & Marinelli, 2025; Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025).

Similar comparisons can be found in other areas of TikTok scholarship. For example, scholars have engaged with the medium of television to emphasise the centrality of channels and programs on TikTok (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2021), to look at TikTok consumption through the lens of binge-watching practices (Kendall, 2021), or to explain the emergence of TikTok alongside shifts in the Chinese television and screen industries (Su, 2023). Similarly, television institutions can be observed looking to TikTok to adopt content for younger generations accustomed to short videos filled with multiple visual stimuli (Škripčová, 2023).

With this background in mind, we turn to Kellner's three-pronged approach to cultural analysis, to in more detail TikTok's intersections with television and its media culture.

Political economy

When examining the political economy of media, Kellner (2011) deems it fundamental to look at systems of production and distribution. In this section, we analyze TikTok's political economy and draw on literature from television production studies to highlight similarities and differences.

TikTok's political economy is well-documented and debated, as it is the first global, major social media platform to have roots in China (Turvy & Scharlach, 2024). As TikTok negotiates Chinese roots with global concerns, a dynamic of parallel platformisation emerges (Kaye et al., 2020). In this dynamic, ByteDance, TikTok's parent company, navigates distinct

political, economic, and cultural contexts. Politically, for example, TikTok's very existence outside of China has been challenged, leading to the ban of the app in countries like India (Kumar & Thussu, 2023). Pressure for a ban of the app in the United States on national security grounds has, more recently, resulted in ByteDance selling its TikTok US operations. As part of the deal, the new joint venture of US investors, including software company Oracle, stores user data exclusively on servers within the United States and retrains the TikTok algorithm based purely on the data of US users (TikTok 2026).

Such an operational separation is itself not a novelty to TikTok. In China, TikTok operates as Douyin, a distinct platform initially created by ByteDance in 2016 to which only Chinese users have access. Put simply, in operational terms, the political economy of TikTok is increasingly splintered – with major international, Chinese-only, and US-only versions of the app being operated. At the same time, in strategical terms, across these operational variants sits a shared aspiration to be something more than just a platform for mere entertainment (Su, 2023). Both TikTok and Douyin have had rapid growth in the e-commerce space, slotting ads in between short-form videos and providing ubiquitous and lucrative sponsorship opportunities. Keane, Yu, Zhao, and Leong (2020) refer to this as a “platform + model,” where social networking, entertainment, and e-commerce converge. This undoubtedly changes the dynamics of all three, content creators become sensitive to monetization, affordances, sociality, and entertainment. We would be remiss if we didn't acknowledge how this merging of e-commerce and entertainment on online platforms mirrors the concept of advertiser-supported television.

The confluence of entertainment and advertising on TikTok occurs most frequently on the For Your Page (FYP), mimicking Raymond Williams's concept of flow. The FYP is “the central feed through which TikTokers interact, centered [on] content from a bubble of like-

minded, similar people” (Jones, 2023, pp 1-2). This shapes TikTok’s attention and visibility economies (Abidin, 2021), intersection with political dynamics (Hautea et al., 2021), and formation of communities through the app (Maddox & Gill, 2023). The For You Page contributes to the construction of flow due to its interacting stream of entertainment and advertisements. Within this, TikTok, like television, engages in its actual production and governance process. That is, not the production of content, but the production of manageable audience attention commodities.

Flow has undergone numerous changes in the social media era, constantly being adapted to new and diverse distribution models – increasing personalization of media content during the narrowcasting era (Uricchio, 2009), staccato flows on YouTube (van Dijck, 2013), actively switching on to streaming platforms (Cox, 2018). Yet, flow has come full circle when applied to a complex platform like TikTok. Here, we encounter an algorithmic flow (Firth & Marinelli, 2025), in which the role previously embodied by the broadcaster is assigned to the platform algorithm. Although attempts have been made to categorise TikTok – some characterising it at the intersection between content community platforms, social networks, and microblogging sites (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022) – we argue that its fundamental nature lies precisely in how it creates a flow of content. Although content on the platform is not created following an editorial line – and therefore following Johnson’s (2019) definition of online TV we cannot categorise the platform as such – we can focus on the audience’s processes of viewing to make sense of the medium (Fiske, 1989).

The platform is frequently grouped alongside social media platforms, most likely for its vertical mobile-first interface; flow experiences have also emerged on social media platforms as “sequential behaviors enacted by groups of people” (Wu, Taneja & Webster, 2021: 2981), describing the habit audiences may have to continuously skip between websites, which on

TikTok may be mirrored by the habit users have to scroll between videos. The flow experience that TikTok provides, however, is closer to that offered by traditional television, emphasising the need to read the platform as televisual. The viewing experience users have on the platform can be defined as lean-back, and when considering the decision fatigue that accompanies viewers when accessing SVOD platforms (Gomez-Uribe & Hunt, 2015), it becomes clear why TikTok is popular. What Kendall (2021) describes as binge-scrolling on TikTok is, simply put, users entering a flow of content that is programmed based on their personal interests.

In this sense, “For You” pages replicate the narrowcasting experience on television, highlighting the importance of situating TikTok within the televisual production and distribution system: although the flow it offers is not scheduled, the content that is shown is determined through “datacasting” (Firth & Marinelli, 2025), encouraging users to shift their agency from content selection to strategic interaction with the platform’s affordances.

The narrowcasting experience of the TikTok FYP relies on targeting both content, audiences, and advertisements. Through datafication, the platform can include targeted advertisements based on users’ algorithmic identities (Cheney-Lippold, 2011). Targeting on algorithmic platforms greatly differs from targeting on traditional television: in the latter case, when narrowcasting transmission was introduced and audiences were fragmented, content was produced and distributed according to the social category it was intended for (Fisher & Mehozay, 2019). Content that is distributed according to algorithmic distribution will also be intended for social categories, but these categories will be built on datafied segmentation. On TikTok, audience identification takes place through “computational referents of correlational and networked positionality” that group people based on their individual consumption and anticipated preferences (Kant, 2020: 50).

The sense of community that united geographically spaced audiences must thus find other ways to emerge on algorithm-based platforms. According to Lupinacci (2020), liveness on social media does not depend on the potential interruption of a given programme, rather on continuous connection. The idea is that something might happen at any time, and the audience will be able to follow it in real time. Through algorithmic distribution, audiences gather the feeling that the content they are watching is fresh, regardless of the date of its actual upload (Lupinacci, 2020). The promise of entertainment is essential in media temporalities, which are further augmented and complicated in the streaming television era. Streaming television is not exempt from manipulating temporal and affective experiences of viewers to extract value from service subscribers (Siles et al., 2025). This shapes access to content, temporally, economically, and culturally (Zhao, 2025). This “planned flow” (Williams, 2003) in which media “fills time by ensuring that something happens” (Doane, 2006: 251) further highlights the convergence of social media and novel, streaming television forms (Lupinacci, 2020).

In addition to time, relatability is key to TikTok’s political economy. Users develop a strong attachment to the flow due to intense relatability to the content, as well as comments on the video (Siles & Meléndez-Moran, 2021), as well as the algorithmically imagined audiences they feel they are a part of (Jones, 2023). TikTok users hold beliefs about “where” they are situated and the content niche(s) the algorithm has assigned them to (Maddox & Gill, 2023): This reinforces their sense of belonging to their “side” of TikTok, and contributes to the development of strategic interaction with content to not stray too far from their desired outcome (Lee et al., 2023). Siles and Valerio-Alfaro (2025) summarize this process by conceptualizing TikTok’s algorithmic flow through the idea of “co-programming.” This concept integrates “programming” in the traditional sense of content selection and sequencing with the computational mechanisms that shape (or “program”) the platform’s

content feed. TikTok's co-programming involves two interconnected processes: users "going with the flow" by allowing algorithms to influence their content choices, while also creating a flow that steers the algorithms toward the users' desired outcomes.

In sum, TikTok demonstrates not only a resurgence of flow but also a transformation of it. The platform extends televisual logics into a computational structure where flow becomes co-produced by users and algorithms. With this in mind, we now turn to the content itself, and how it is given form within this media ecosystem.

Textual Analysis

Kellner's (2011) second mode of cultural analysis is textual analysis, which is a necessary step to fully understand the discourses and ideological positions a given text may contain. Close readings are necessary to determine meanings as media are sites where identities, ideologies, forms, and values converge and battle for dominance. As such, it is important to understand how flow impacts content forms and genres, as well as how creators understand this.

Textual analysis of TikTok and related discourses that unfold on the app are readily available – discussing the form of TikTok content (Rettberg, 2017; Wang & Suthers, 2022), types of influencers (Abidin, 2021), content creation strategies (Maddox & Gill, 2023), or topics such as war and geopolitical strife (Cervi and & Divon, 2023), grief (Krutrök, 2021), climate change (Hautea et al., 2021), or sexual health (Stein et al., 2022). Acknowledging the cultural complexity of these discourses, we picked one case to delve into the intersections of TikTok's and television's broadcasting culture: the phenomenon of TikTok therapy and talk content.

In this section, we showcase how, as a case, TikTok therapy content exemplifies the practices of serialization, audience engagement, and emotional realism that seek to draw in viewers and capture their attention. At the same time, we note how the openness of TikTok as a platform decentralizes textual production, giving rise to a more dynamic, multi-directional creative process.

Case Study: TikTok Therapy and Talk Shows

The rise of television gave way to distinctive media genres, with talk shows playing a pivotal role in shaping public discourse on personal storytelling, self-disclosure, and therapeutic narratives. From *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to *Dr. Phil*, these programs functioned as mediated spaces where guests shared personal struggles, sought expert advice, and engaged in public confessions (Illouz, 2012; Peck, 1995). A key feature of Oprah was the “aha moment,” a structured emotional breakthrough that allowed guests to articulate transformative realizations—an approach echoed on TikTok, where creators condense complex psychological insights into short, digestible moments of revelation. Similarly, Dr. Phil framed personal transformation as a structured intervention, often portraying guests' struggles as a journey from crisis to resolution.

TikTok therapy content mirrors these formats, with creators producing serialized “before and after” narratives that position self-improvement as both a personal process and a performance for public consumption. Over time, television talk shows established a framework in which such emotional vulnerability and expert validation became central to constructing public knowledge about mental health. In the digital age, TikTok has emerged as a key platform for “theratainment”—the transformation of therapy into entertainment (Stein, 2024).

Talk shows have long blurred the line between therapy and entertainment, bringing mental health conversations into mainstream media while also commodifying emotional self-

disclosure (Shattuc, 1997; Grindstaff, 2002). Programs like Oprah and Dr. Phil framed therapy as both a spectacle and a moral intervention, positioning hosts as authority figures guiding guests through highly visible self-improvement journeys (Peck, 1995; Lofton, 2011). For instance, Oprah frequently featured public therapy sessions, such as Winfrey's interviews with trauma survivors, where emotional catharsis was encouraged through audience participation. This same dynamic can be observed on TikTok, where therapists like @the.truth.doctor respond to user-submitted questions with direct, emotional advice, reinforcing the therapeutic spectacle through digital interactivity.

Reality television further extended these practices by creating confessional spaces where personal transformation was performed for mass consumption (Andrejevic, 2004; Dovey, 2000). Shows like *Intervention* dramatized addiction recovery by centering expert-led confrontations, presenting rehabilitation as both a personal and public affair. On TikTok, this manifests in viral clips of therapists reacting to toxic relationship behaviors or coaching followers on recognizing emotional abuse, replicating the interventionist logic of these television formats. While TikTok decentralizes these conversations, its content still adheres to the core structures of public therapy, emphasizing emotional authenticity and audience engagement.

On TikTok, both licensed mental health professionals and everyday users participate in short-form therapeutic discourse, adapting elements of talk shows to the platform's algorithmic and interactive environment. "TherapyTok" has emerged as a dominant subgenre, with creators like TherapyJeff serving as hybrid figures—part educator, part entertainer (Stein, 2024). Unlike traditional talk shows, which rely on structured segments and pre-screened guests, TikTok therapy content thrives on direct engagement, with creators selecting topics based on user comments and tailoring their content to audience demand (Dubrofsky, 2007; Blum,

2021). This mirrors the participatory nature of television talk shows, where live call-ins and in-studio questions shaped discussions and amplified audience concerns.

This shift democratizes therapeutic discourse, granting broader access to mental health conversations that were once controlled by media institutions. However, it also raises concerns about credibility, as unverified advice circulates alongside professional expertise, contributing to an environment where therapeutic knowledge is crowd-sourced rather than institutionally vetted (Stein, 2024). This mirrors longstanding critiques of television's therapeutic culture, where the commercial opportunity of attention-grabbing emotional spectacles often took precedence over psychological rigor (Peck, 1995; Illouz, 2012).

A defining characteristic of TikTok therapy content is its serialized nature. Just as talk shows structure discussions across multiple episodes, TikTok creators produce thematic series such as "5 Signs You Need Therapy" or "How to Deal with Anxiety in Public Places" (Stein, 2024). This form of serial storytelling fosters ongoing engagement, much like audiences tuning in for multi-episode interventions on Dr. Phil or self-help series on Oprah (Tolson, 2001; Illouz, 2012). TikTok's algorithm further reinforces this pattern, encouraging users to binge-watch multiple videos from the same creator, replicating the episodic structure of television therapy narratives. TikTok also offers a playlist feature to creators with higher follower counts: The ability to group similar content together akin to a series, making bingeing content on one topic easier. Making your content into a "series" that audiences have to check back into periodically for updates is common content creation advice reminiscent of weekly watercooler television (Bhatti, 2023).

Additionally, TikTok's duet and stitch features enable layered, participatory conversations that extend beyond a single creator, echoing the multi-guest discussions of traditional talk shows (see also Quick and Maddox, 2024). These interactions transform therapy from a

monologic performance into a dialogic exchange, much like how live studio audiences and call-in segments shaped talk show discourse (Timberg & Erler, 2002). This continuity between TikTok and television talk shows underscores the persistence of serialized mental health discourse, adapting established media structures to new technological affordances.

TikTok Therapy content also borrows heavily from the stylistic and emotional conventions of television talk shows while adapting to short-form digital media. Many therapy creators film themselves in casual, home-like settings, reinforcing a sense of authenticity and emotional closeness with viewers (Faltsek et al., 2023; Stein, 2024). Unlike the polished studios of traditional talk shows, TikTok therapy content embraces lo-fi aesthetics, using direct eye contact, casual attire, and informal speech to foster trust and relatability. This recalls early talk shows like Donahue, which cultivated intimacy by positioning the host among the audience rather than on an elevated stage.

TikTok also amplifies emotional realism, a characteristic shared with both talk shows and reality television. Close-up framing, direct address to the camera, and platform-specific vernacular – such as on-screen text overlays summarizing key points – heighten immediacy, drawing viewers into the therapeutic exchange much like Oprah's one-on-one interviews (Giles, 2003; Grindstaff, 2002). By examining these aesthetic and emotional continuities, we can better understand how TikTok therapy content remediates and evolves televised talk formats, maintaining core affective strategies while adapting to digital platforms.

The emergence of talk content on TikTok exemplifies how legacy media genres are reconfigured within new digital environments. While television talk shows institutionalized therapy as a media spectacle, TikTok decentralizes these conversations, making them more accessible but also more susceptible to misinformation and commodification (Illouz, 2017; Stein, 2024). The persistence of serial storytelling, emotional realism, and confessional

culture suggests that talk content remains a central mode of engagement, bridging the historical gap between television and social media.

Much like Dr. Phil extended its influence beyond television through books, spin-off shows, and self-help products, TikTok therapy creators have built multi-platform brands, publishing books, hosting paid webinars, and monetizing their content. However, unlike television producers who curated therapeutic narratives, TikTok's algorithm determines which mental health content gains visibility, shaping public perceptions in ways that are guided more by platform metrics than clinical expertise. As such, although we can observe a decentralization in the textual discourse itself, the continuity of textual genres and practices that adjust content to the logics of algorithmic flows signals a persistence of fundamentally centralised distribution logics that have defined the television medium.

Audience and reception studies

As we have discussed in the previous sections, media constitute powerful structures shaping how people connect with each other and the world around them. According to Kellner (2011), the third site of analysis for cultural work is audience reception and media culture, which focuses on how different audiences decode and use media texts.

As we have alluded to, there exist fundamental similarities between TikTok and television that create similar viewing experiences around a planned audio-visual flow of content. Yet, there are also substantial differences. These are related in part to changing modes of media consumption itself, widely documented over the last two decades, taking place in an increasingly private (Livingstone, 2002), interactive (Jenkins, 2006), mobile (Hjorth et al., 2012), abundant (Boczkowski, 2021), and personalised media landscape (Kant, 2020). This, in particular, has re-shaped forms of attention and associated social experiences we can observe around both TikTok and television.

As an everyday object, the television has often been theorised in an environmental way as a “background noise”, shaping the atmosphere of private, household lives (Lull, 1980) and shared, public culture (Scannel, 1989). The mobile and personalised nature of TikTok conflicts with the centrality that the television held as a technological object on the organisation of the household, for example – which gave it a cultural significance not just as a medium but as a personal object in itself (Spigel, 2022). TikTok, as an app, lacks such central materio-cultural significance and form. More so, it appears mostly functionally similar in how people engage with it as a means to structure their everyday lives, manage their moods, and sense of public connection (Schellewald, 2023).

What people consume on TikTok is not so much individual videos, yet, instead, as we have discussed earlier, a continuous flow of content, the “For You” page. In other words, many users differentiate between the content they pay full attention to and the background content they consume with less attention. TikTok falls into the latter category, where users engage with content casually, not with the same level of focus as they would when watching a full episode on a streaming platform. We can grasp this in descriptions of actual TikTok users.

In a study conducted by Siles and Meléndez-Moran (2021: 3), users described TikTok as “my oasis”. Similarly, users in a study by Kang and Lou (2022: 5) spoke about TikTok as a private little space that “allows her to experience personal and private moments”. Likewise, participants in Schellewald’s (2023: 1573) study have described their “For You” pages as a “true escape” that allows them to break from their ordinary everyday life. What these users describe is engaging with and navigating an escapist and imagined space, rather than receiving and following a particular shared and unified narrative in focus – raising concerns amongst some scholars who see growth of TikTok as a step towards for the further fragmentation of public spheres (Gerbaudo, 2024).

In these descriptions, the fragmented nature of TikTok content, such as the division of series into small clips, can sometimes lead to frustration, especially when users try to replicate the continuous flow of traditional television and stabilise a fixed pleasurable appearance. Users report feeling “hooked” or “lost” in the app’s algorithmic flow, with some even expressing that TikTok’s vertical screen provides a more immersive experience than television (Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025).

The attention paid to content on TikTok remains secondary to the broader experience of scrolling through the app, however. For many users, TikTok is primarily a source of distraction, and their interest in specific forms of content is often incidental (Schellewald, 2024a). Users find the overall experience of engaging with the platform most appealing. This “uncommitted attention” is a key aspect of how TikTok reshapes the traditional viewing experience (Siles & Valerio-Alfaro, 2025).

TikTok's material and technological aspects further influence how content is consumed. Unlike traditional television and even streaming platforms, which keep textual (content) and material (navigation and recommendation) dimensions separate, TikTok seamlessly integrates them (Lüders & Sundet, 2022). Paratextual content, such as video explanations or reviews of shows, is presented in the same format and alongside the main content (Gray, 2010). This integration makes the distinction between text and paratext less significant. Users also navigate the app using features like comments and sharing, which provide additional context and social interaction, turning viewing experiences into activities of social association and orientation (Cullen et al., 2025).

This sense of social connection is an important part of TikTok’s appeal, as it adds a social layer to reception dynamics that have traditionally shaped television viewing (Silverstone, 1994), such as in the household context (Morley, 1992). Şot (2023) describes practices of co-

scrolling, for instance, where family members like parents scroll together on their phone with their kids to have a shared social experience of the otherwise personalised app. And as work like that of McLean et al. (2023) or Schellewald (2024a) shows, TikTok users utilise the content sharing functionalities of the TikTok app to create new social online spaces around shared clips and TikTok video content online.

Within these empirical instances, we see emergent practices that appropriate and domesticate algorithmic technologies, grounding them in the domains of daily life, the family, or interpersonal relationship management (Siles, 2023; Siles, Gómez-Cruz, & Ricaurte, 2023). Put simply, audiences experience TikTok as social entertainment, in a way reminiscent of television viewing. TikTok becomes part of shared social routines that echo the experience of gathering in a family room to watch television together – urging us to explore how TikTok re-shapes social entertainment and its anchoring role in communal life at home (Lull, 1980).

Like television scholars, TikTok scholars should thus prioritise a stance of non-media-centricity (Morley, 2007) and be cautious of the fallacy of meaningfulness (Hermes, 1995). Platforms and algorithms should not be revered as more important and worthy objects of our analytical attention than the people who experience these media, as in the end it is all about people and the impact of media on their lives (Livingstone, 2019).

Conclusion

We have explored similarities and differences at the TikTok-TV intersection. We have grounded our discussion by acknowledging two things. Firstly, we acknowledged the role that the medium of television played in shaping social realities in the 20th century. Secondly, we pointed towards the increasing proliferation of the media landscape that occurred in the 21st century. From this position, we explored the influence that television has on digital platforms like TikTok, which are becoming an increasingly dominant element of the

contemporary media landscape. To structure our discussion, we followed the three-pronged framework of Kellner (2011) by examining questions of production, textual form, and audience reception.

Regarding political economy, we highlighted how TikTok remediates flow experiences to produce audience and attention commodities. At the same time, we noted how TikTok's architecture complicates pre-existing ideas of flow. We underlined a shift in its social organizing principle, moving away from a content scheduling practice directed towards audience segments identified through social strata. Instead, today, platforms like TikTok schedule content in a way that groups users dynamically through their relationship with others based on modelled consumption habits and preferences. As such, we emphasised the productive role of the TikTok audience within this production context itself, co-programming the flow experience through their interaction.

On the dimension of textual analysis, we took the case of therapy and talk content to outline how TikTok genre formation and aesthetic styles are adapted around this dynamic of flow experience. We showcased similarities in practices like serialisation, audience engagement, and emotional realism through which creators try to capture and retain the attention of views on the "For You" page. At the same time, we noted how TikTok's structure as a social media app decentralises the narrativity of such genres, for example through the app's duet and stitch features, allowing narratives to branch out dynamically. Thus, while TikTok as a platform recreates a centralised authority with power over scheduling, the dynamics of genre and narrative formation within the flow experience emerge as a decentralised counterbalance.

We have observed a similar pattern in our analysis of TikTok audience reception practices. We have foregrounded how TikTok affords similar functionalities to television, like in terms of opportunities of content selection. Moreover, we have discussed how TikTok audiences

engage with the architecture of the “For You” flow experience, giving rise to a form of uncommitted attention. This, we argued, remediates environmental qualities of the television as background noise of the home atmosphere. At the same time, TikTok lacks the same socio-material significance that the television occupied as a household object. Instead, we have argued, TikTok seems to open up a virtual space and background against which social connections can be played out by engaging with trending content, in co-consumption practices, or sharing content online.

Rather than viewing TikTok as a rupture with televisual traditions, we thus propose that it represents a mutation, one that carries forward the commercial logics, genre structures, and audience behaviours once foundational to television, and reconfigures them under the terms of algorithmic personalization. Here, TikTok’s algorithm does not replace flow, but it intensely localises it. The production of meaning, genre, and sociality on the app is not dislocated from television’s legacy in that sense. It is a recalibration of it. TikTok does not signify the end of broadcasting, but its afterlife.

TikTok signals an era where accounting for emergent textual strategies and audience reception practices that decentrally enact TikTok’s algorithmic broadcasting logics becomes ever more analytically crucial (Siles, 2023). If we are to understand TikTok’s cultural significance, we thus need to begin asking more systematically what it continues. The questions that should be asked in return might not be directed towards the goal of understanding TikTok itself, but understanding the formation of social experiences - on generational, subcultural, communal, or interpersonal scales - through the app, and how the particular qualities of these social experiences come to be historically distinct in their character.

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