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## Is it funny or a trend?: Examining US news humor on TikTok

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### ABSTRACT

Humor is foundational to American politics and online culture. However, the content and effects of political humor vary greatly depending on the type of humor and context in which it is deployed. TikTok is particularly known for its humorous content, and US news organizations have capitalized on TikTok's popularity by creating accounts. Using digital affordances and relief theory as theoretical lenses, we qualitatively content analyze US news organizations' TikTok videos (WaPo, NYT, WSJ, ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, NPR), asking how US news humor manifests on TikTok and how TikTok affordances impact US news humor on the platform. We find that US news organizations' TikTok content ranges from no humor (ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN) to explicit humor (WaPo). News organizations also incorporated small attempts at lighthearted content using TikTok features and norms.

### KEYWORDS

Affordances; political humor; relief theory; TikTok

Humor is foundational to modern American politics (Becker, 2014). Through cartoons, jokes in sitcoms, late-night comedy shows, politician appearances on talk shows, and social media content, humor has become an important vehicle for distributing political content, influencing voter attitudes, and learning (Baumgartner, 2021b). In fact, Hariman (2008) claims that “Parody and related forms of political humor are essential resources for sustaining democratic public culture” (p. 247). This claim becomes even more accurate in the digital media environment, where social media platforms encourage “silly citizenship” (Hartley, 2012, p. 145) and position “irreverence” as a mode of political engagement (Highfield, 2016, 2029). Accordingly, scholars now ask how political and news humor operates vis-à-vis the specific platforms on which these messages are deployed (Davis, Love, & Killen, 2018; Holton & Lewis, 2011).

We continue this line of inquiry by considering the nature of US news humor on TikTok, a recent influential social media platform. TikTok is a meme-based platform where users often base their video content on trending sounds and effects, which often have humorous undertones or are used humorously (Matamoros-Fernández, 2023; Zeng & Abidin, 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2020). Many TikTok users are 18–29 years old (Gottfried, 2024), an

age range known to be particularly attentive and receptive to humorous content (Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011). Therefore, using digital affordances and relief theory as sensitizing theoretical frameworks (Blumer, 1954), we explore if and how major US news organizations position news content as humorous on TikTok, or rather, how TikTok's features and norms impact how news humor is deployed on TikTok. In doing so, this study continues a long history of research on political humor (see Baumgartner, 2021b), contributes to the literature on digital affordances (Zeng & Abidin, 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2020), and extends our understanding of political humor in a post-broadcast era.

### Political Humor: Forms, Effects, and Evolutions

Humor can be broadly understood as “anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make them laugh” (Martin & Ford, 2018, p. 3), “an utterance that makes fun of seriousness” (Matamoros-Fernández, 2023, p. 1; see also Lockyer & Pickering, 2005), or “communication meant as facetious or non-serious” (Godioli & Little, 2022, p. 307). A common operationalization of humor is how much mirth or amusement an individual feels when engaging with the content. Humor as experienced mirth allows for a broader recognition of the psychological reactions to humorous or light-hearted content, like an internal warmth or pleasant feeling, without restriction to physical reactions, like laughter (Gulas & Weinberger, 2006). Accordingly, experienced mirth allows for reactions to more subtle forms of humor (Gulas & Weinberger, 2006). This is important because within the larger humor construct, there are many humorous techniques, including parody, satire, irony, jokes, and wordplay, among others (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004), each of which may be experienced in different ways.

Political humor has been conceptualized as “any form of communication that alludes to something political and is intended to make people laugh” (Lichter, Baumgartner, & Morris, 2018, p. 8). Parody and satire are commonly used in the political context. Parody involves imitating a text, genre, or person to entertain or make fun of the original text (Becker, 2014; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004). We see such parody in *Saturday Night Live* sketches, where comedians mimic politicians, exaggerating their characteristics, histories, and political records for humorous effect. Satire, as seen on *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and the *Onion* website, is more critical than parody, where one offers “commentary on the current state of affairs that is both aggressive and judgmental and at times playful and fun” (Becker, 2020, p. 274).

Given the rise of political comedy television, ample research has explored the content and effects of political humor and related constructs (Baumgartner, 2021b; Becker, 2020). Focusing mainly on late-night comedy shows, scholars have found that political humor often centers on political

elites' political failings and personality traits (Lichter, Baumgartner, & Morris, 2018; Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003; Young, 2006). For example, President Trump is a popular source of parodies and jokes due to his personality, online behavior, and checkered/reality television background (Baumgartner, 2021a). Importantly, political humor can positively affect attention to political issues, political efficacy, trust, knowledge, and content sharing, especially among those less interested in and knowledgeable about politics (Baum, 2002; Becker, 2011; Coronel, O'Donnell, Pandey, Delli Carpini, & Falk, 2021), although political humor effects can vary depending on the type (simple humor vs. complex satire) and target (self-deprecating vs. directed) of the humor (Baumgartner, 2021b).

Scholarly interest in political humor extends to the online context. Internet culture is distinctly humorous, especially as the internet “meme” – online content that can be repackaged and imitated (e.g., an image with modifiable satirical text; Shifman, 2013) – became the basic unit for discussing and critiquing cultural phenomena (Attardo, 2023). Meme humor is central to online discourse and a key component of youth political expression (Penney, 2020). Online political humor has effects on social media users similar to that of television comedy programming, such as influencing public opinion and shaping political behavior (Halversen & Weeks, 2023). Politicians and journalists have capitalized on social media's humorous nature to promote themselves, communicate political issues and news, and engage publics (Holton & Lewis, 2011; Molyneux, 2015). However, much like how humor can take different forms in various contexts, political memes can take various shapes depending on the platform on which they are deployed.

### ***TikTok and humor***

TikTok is a short video platform first launched in China as Douyin in 2016 by the parent company ByteDance. TikTok came to the US in 2018 when the company acquired Musical.ly, a lip-syncing platform. TikTok has amassed an impressive 170 million American users (“Statement on,” 2024), with 62% of US adults ages 18–29 reporting TikTok use (Gottfried, 2024). TikTok has unique features that afford particular communication modes (see Davis, 2020). TikTok videos can be up to 10 minutes in length, but are often much shorter (e.g., 15–60 seconds), and often include unique audio and visual elements. TikTok loops these videos on an algorithmically curated and personalized “For You Page” (FYP), which is central to TikTok's identity, user experience, and appeal (Schellewald, 2023). Users can use original audio or overlay the video with music or sounds (e.g., popular culture moments, movie quotes) created by other users or provided by the platform. TikTok also encourages users to participate in trends through the algorithmic

promotion of sounds and features like “stitching” or “dueting” (e.g., reacting to the original video) (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). These features and trend promotion create a “light-hearted vibe” on the platform (Matamoros-Fernández, 2023, p. 1).

As a mimetic platform, scholars argue that a “comedic tone” (Schellewald, 2021, p. 1443) and “humor and play are ... central to TikTok’s culture” (Matamoros-Fernández, 2023, p. 2), with the platform describing itself as “the epicenter of more engaging and inclusive humor” (Grignon, 2022, para. 2). While TikTok humor varies greatly depending on the content, general humor on TikTok focuses on shared experiences and relatability (Grignon, 2022). TikTok videos often include content that makes light of serious topics, references humorous pop culture moments, and/or includes humorous sounds and visual effects. TikTok’s humorous and lighthearted norms have already impacted political and news content on the platform. Indeed, Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and López-García (2022) found that news organizations worldwide are beginning to incorporate trending sounds, funny videos, and filters in their news reporting on TikTok. In fact, *The Washington Post* is particularly known for its humorous news content on TikTok (Klug, 2020; Newman, 2022), a point we discuss further below.

### **Relief Theory**

Theoretically, the appeal, popularity, and effects of traditional political humor (e.g., political comedy television) and TikTok can be explained in part by relief theory. According to Meyer (2000), relief theory is one of the three main theories of humor creation, alongside incongruity theory and superiority theory (Martin & Ford, 2018). While incongruity theory emphasizes the discrepancy and surprise of humorous content, and superiority theory highlights the winners and losers of humorous situations (Gruner, 1967, 1997), the relief theory of humor suggests that humor serves as a mechanism for releasing tension and reducing psychological or emotional stress. Indeed, relief theory posits that humor leads to releasing nervous energy, resulting in a sense of pleasure and relief, thereby allowing individuals to experience amusement (Morreall, 2010; Watson, 2014). Simply put, humor is enjoyable and puts people at ease. Political humor, then, is a useful strategic communication tool because it softens or blurs the serious political content that can be a source of nervous energy with entertainment, a phenomenon termed *infotainment* (Baym, 2015).

Similarly, TikTok’s short video format, endless supply of personalized videos, and humorous norms via sounds/effects uniquely provide and promote entertainment and, likely, relief (Zhang, 2021). Moreover, TikTok videos likely do not require deep cognitive resources due to their shortened length and humorous undertones. Accordingly, viewing TikTok content may allow

users to quickly release tension and enjoy watching the content. For example, Xiao and Yu (2022) found that during the less severe moments of the COVID-19 pandemic, humorous TikToks increased the source likability in messages and intentions to engage in protective behaviors.

Collectively, a wealth of literature supports political humor's presence, popularity, and effects (Baumgartner, 2021b). Relief theory offers one explanation for these effects (Meyer, 2000). Given TikTok's humorous and short video nature, relief theory could also explain why users are drawn to this platform. Although humor is a well-documented component of American politics (Becker, 2014) and TikTok (Grignon, 2022; Matamoros-Fernández, 2023), the nature of US news humor on TikTok warrants further exploration, contributing to extant research that discusses this phenomenon (see Klug, 2020; Newman, 2022). Therefore, this study is oriented broadly around the following questions.

**RQ1a:** How does US news humor manifest on TikTok?

**RQ1b:** How do TikTok affordances impact US news humor on the platform?

## Method

To address these questions, we analyzed TikTok videos posted by major US news organizations for their humorous nature. Specifically, we manually collected the URLs and analyzed the 30 most recent TikTok videos (at the time of data collection, February 10, 2024) posted by the verified accounts of the *Washington Post* (WaPo; @washingtonpost), *New York Times* (NYT; @nytimes), *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ; @wallstreetjournal), ABC News (@abcnews), CBS News (@cbsnews), NBC News (@nbcnews), CNN (@cnn), and NPR (@npr) ( $N = 240$ ). These outlets represent major US newspapers, broadcast, cable, and radio networks that prominently discuss political topics, reach sizable national audiences (Grieco, 2020; Watson, 2024), and have verified TikTok accounts. We analyzed the most recent TikTok videos posted to each verified account to mirror user engagement patterns; users likely watch the videos closest to the top of the page if they click on an account.

We analyzed the TikTok videos using qualitative content analysis, a research method used broadly for the “subjective interpretation of contents ... in a systematic and context-dependent manner” (Selvi, 2020, p. 442). Specifically, qualitative content analysis “works inductively by summarizing and classifying elements or parts of the text material” (Scheufele, 2008, p. 1; White & Marsh, 2006). Qualitative content analyses allow coding categories and trends to emerge from the text compared to quantitative

content analyses that impose a rigid set of theoretical coding categories onto the text. Accordingly, theories and concepts, like political humor, affordances, and relief theory serve as sensitizing concepts that orient the analysis (i.e., political humor is the analytical focus, with an eye toward understanding how TikTok affordances contribute to this humor), but the specific iterations of these concepts emerge from the texts (i.e., the text dictates *how* political humor manifests; Blumer, 1954; Selvi, 2020). Given the inductive nature of this analysis, previous definitions, and the audio-visual nature of TikTok, we define political humor broadly as any verbal, visual, or auditory expression that makes fun of serious political content or presents political content in a lighthearted manner (Lichter, Baumgartner, & Morris, 2018; Matamoros-Fernández, 2023; Meyer, 2000).

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the four authors independently familiarized themselves with the texts, engaging in descriptive coding to identify the general content of each TikTok video and note initial observations about news organizations' use of humor. After discussing these observations, the authors engaged in a second round of analysis to generate initial humorous codes, attending to verbal, visual, and auditory ways humor manifested in the TikTok videos. The authors discussed these patterns. The third stage included searching for trends among the codes relevant to the research questions. Finally, exemplar videos were extracted to illustrate the trends. It is important to note that, despite this step-by-step process, these stages are relatively fluid and iterative as scholars move back and forth between coding and analysis.

## Results and analysis

This study questioned how US news humor manifests on TikTok (RQ1a) and how TikTok affordances impact this humor (RQ1b). The qualitative content analysis of US news organizations' TikTok videos revealed three trends: 1) no humor in news organizations' TikTok videos; 2) small attempts at lighthearted content following TikTok norms; and 3) *The Washington Post* is in a league of its own regarding creating humorous TikToks.

### *No humor*

Most of the news organizations' TikToks in our sample did not contain any form of humor (RQ1a). Instead, the dominant trend was for news organizations (except WaPo) to post clips from their already-recorded news segments, footage from news events, or short videos reporting on or explaining political topics. Posting clips from news segments was common with ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN – news organizations with televised programming. For example, in one TikTok, CNN clipped a news segment where contributor and former Moscow bureau chief Jill Dougherty discussed former Fox News host Tucker Carlson's



interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin (CNN, 2024b). This TikTok was two and a half minutes, and the only production choices likely added were closed captioning on the video and the incorporation of some narrated static images. Similarly, ABC posted a one-minute clip from a “This Week” segment where journalist Jonathan Karl interviewed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu about evacuating Palestinian civilians amidst the Israeli/Palestinian conflict (ABC News, 2024b). ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN already dedicate substantial resources to producing video content; therefore, posting previously recorded news segments to TikTok is a natural transition with a potentially large payoff due to TikTok’s large user base and viral capabilities.

News organizations also posted raw footage from political and news events. For example, the NYT, WSJ, CNN, ABC, CBS, and NBC all posted video footage of President Biden responding to the special counsel report on his classified document handling. Many of the news organizations also posted various footage of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. In these TikToks, the news organizations did not offer any commentary about the news event. Closed captions were included in these TikToks, but they otherwise lacked other production or content alterations that would make the videos humorous.

Finally, print and radio news organizations, those that do not have televised news segments to repost on TikTok – mostly NYT, WSJ, and NPR – did create some videos, presumably *for* TikTok or another online platform (e.g., Instagram, Facebook), to report on and educate users about political topics (see Goo & Montgomery, 2016). For example, NPR posted a two-minute TikTok discussion on the US Supreme Court’s deliberations on whether Donald Trump could be removed from state primary ballots for his incitement of the 2021 US Capitol insurrection (NPR, 2024). In this video, NPR editor Kristin Wright reported from outside the US Supreme Court, explaining the unprecedented case and interviewing protestors/supporters. Similarly, NYT reporter Jazmine Ulloa was filmed analyzing the campaign strategy of 2024 GOP candidate Nikki Haley (New York Times, 2024b). The video of Ulloa was small and in the upper corner of the TikTok, while videos and images of Haley campaigning dominated the visual frame. The video had text and closed captions, and there are two moments where poll results are superimposed on the video, but no other production alterations.

Ultimately, the use of political humor was not a dominant trend in US news organizations’ TikTok videos. The news organizations in our sample merely took advantage of TikTok as another platform to distribute content and reach audiences online.

### ***Small attempts at light-hearted content***

The majority of news organizations’ TikTok videos made no explicit attempt at humor. However, news organizations did include some auditory and visual



effects – lighthearted music, peculiar sounds, and emojis/digital stickers – potentially to lighten the heaviness of their news content and provide relief to TikTok users (e.g., relief theory, Meyer, 2000) (RQ1b). Considering the earlier conceptualization of humor as experienced mirth, one does not necessarily need to laugh out loud to feel humor. Therefore, although these auditory and visual effects may not explicitly trigger laughter as humor often does, they could increase the ease and enjoyment of news content, resulting in some pleasure and relief (or at least continued watching), which is aligned with how humor operates per relief theory (Watson, 2014).

Lighthearted background music was a common production choice observed across the sample, potentially included to soften the news content and increase the entertainment/engaging value of news organizations' TikToks. For example, CNN included what sounded like vibraphone or synthesizer music with staccato note articulations (notes with shortened duration known to create an amusing/humorous sound; Carr, Olsen, & Thompson, 2023) in their TikTok showing interviews with senior citizens who shared their opinions of Donald Trump and Joe Biden's age (CNN, 2024a). Music with an upbeat drum beat also set the mood for an NBC TikTok on the 2024 GOP caucuses and primaries (NBC News, 2024b). The decision to include lighthearted music in TikToks is certainly intentional. Indeed, some news organizations featured ominous music in their videos, such as when the NYT played low and sustained notes in their TikTok about Israeli airstrikes (New York Times, 2024a) or when CBS set their TikTok of five Marines dying in a helicopter crash to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, a song known for its subdued and somber melody (CBS News, 2024b).

News organizations also included peculiar sounds in some of their TikToks, a more explicit (albeit still small) attempt at bringing levity and potentially humor into their news reporting. Buijzen and Valkenburg (2004) define a peculiar sound as a "funny sound, unexpected sound, as in cartoons" (p. 154). We saw such sounds in some of the news organizations' TikToks, particularly the use of "dings" (the ding of a cash register), "cha-chings" (to indicate money), and "swooshes" or "swishes," which is a common cutscene sound effect. In one WSJ TikTok, reporter Richard Rubin used dings and swooshes to aid an explanation of the benefits and drawbacks of filing taxes early (Wall Street Journal, 2024). Similarly, an ABC TikTok reported on Americans' credit card debt and inflation with the help of dings, clicks, and whistle slide noises to illustrate the rising debt's impact on the US economy (ABC News, 2024a). Importantly, this video also incorporated upbeat music. In using these sounds coupled with swift visual transitions, news organizations can auditorily punctuate their storytelling and simulate a somewhat cartoon-style of news reporting.

A third production choice that indicates small attempts at lighthearted content was using animated clip art, emojis, and stickers (pre-made graphic images) to make the news content more entertaining and engaging. CBS

included such clip art – animated arrows and emergency sirens – in their TikTok about hurricanes, where CBS News’ Dave Malkoff discussed the possibility of category six hurricanes as the climate changes (CBS News, 2024a). NBC also used emojis and animations to illustrate their discussion of fentanyl use in the US and China, (NBC News, 2024a). When the reporter mentioned these countries, the US and Chinese flags appeared at the top of the TikTok. Fentanyl pills popped up and then migrated to a US map to demonstrate the US’ renewed interest in limiting the flow of fentanyl. Both hurricanes and fentanyl use are serious topics with dangerous consequences. Visually illustrating these topics with clip art, emojis, and stickers adds levity to the content. These animated graphics thus engage TikTok users and signal a shift from serious reporting to a hybrid model that aligns with digital media culture.

Although music, peculiar sounds, and animated clip art/sticker components may not represent explicit attempts at political humor, such production choices do make the news content more accessible and entertaining, potentially lightening the heaviness of news content. Given that TikToks are short in length, a few dings, swooshes, and animated graphics could be compelling enough to encourage continued watching, increasing their political news exposure (Baum, 2002).

### ***The Washington Post***

WaPo is in a league of its own regarding incorporating humor into its TikToks. Not only did WaPo include all the small attempts at lighthearted content described above – music, peculiar sounds, animated clip art – but every TikTok in this analysis was clearly made for TikTok and had an explicit humorous orientation, a finding supported by other research and news reports (e.g., Klug, 2020; Newman, 2022; Pellico, 2019). WaPo incorporated comedy sketches and parodies, jokes, and TikTok sounds/effects into their news reporting on TikTok (RQ1a; RQ1b).

Similar to the content we might see on *SNL*, WaPo created comedy sketches and used parody to act out their news reporting in most of their TikTok videos. However, while multiple actors embody *different* characters in *SNL* sketches, WaPo took advantage of TikTok’s ability to layer the *same* individual in a single video, resulting in the same WaPo reporter playing multiple characters. For example, in one WaPo TikTok discussing the Supreme Court’s deliberation to keep President Trump off primary ballots, WaPo’s “TikTok guy,” Dave Jorgenson (Jorgenson, n.d.), assumed the character of Donald Trump, a Trump supporter, a Trump opposer, and a “tired” voter, often at the same time (Washington Post, 2024f). Jorgenson physically embodied the states of Colorado, Maine, Oregon, Minnesota, and Michigan in this TikTok, an example of anthropomorphic humor (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004). Jorgenson also used the eyes and mouth green-screen TikTok effect to overlay his eyes and mouth onto pictures of the Supreme Court justices. Although the TikTok caption provided a straightforward

description of this news event, the TikTok itself used parody to tell the news story, requiring users to have some knowledge of the political context and Trump's mannerisms to understand the humor. In another TikTok, WaPo TikTok producer Carmella Boykin acted out Ron DeSantis ending his presidential campaign, parodying his persona and embodying the characters of journalists, Trump, the DeSantis campaign, and the International Churchill Society – the TikTok made a joke of DeSantis misquoting Winston Churchill (Washington Post, 2024a). By jokingly criticizing the DeSantis campaign as poorly run and incapable of beating Trump, WaPo used parody and satire to inform users of a relevant news event while also providing commentary about Trump's GOP stronghold.

WaPo also incorporated jokes and pop culture references in their news TikToks. In a TikTok describing the shutdown of the online news website, *The Messenger*, WaPo compared *The Messenger* losing a 50-million-dollar budget to popular YouTuber Mr. Beast, setting 50 million dollars on fire for a YouTube video (Washington Post, 2024d). In the same TikTok, Jorgenson took a lighter and set fire to a \$50 monopoly bill, joking that he could afford to do so “because he has all four railroads.” At the end of the TikTok, Jorgenson thanked users for keeping WaPo journalists employed. Such jokes and pop culture references brought humor into an otherwise depressing story of journalists losing their jobs and connected the news event to users' lives.

Finally, WaPo was the only network in the sample that consistently took advantage of TikTok effects and norms in their video production. TikTok's greenscreen was a staple of their videos, enabling WaPo to situate their comedy sketches in relevant yet fictitious backdrops, adding to the humor of the TikToks. For example, WaPo created a space command center using greenscreen to parody the concern over Taylor Swift arriving from Japan in time to watch Travis Kelce play in Super Bowl LVIII (Washington Post, 2024g). WaPo also used greenscreen to create a *Survivor* scene to parody Trump's request for immunity from his criminal charges (Washington Post, 2024b). WaPo demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of TikTok norms, such as using the lip-sync effect to discuss the leaked recording of GOP candidate Chris Christie disparaging Nikki Haley's chances of winning the 2024 GOP presidential nomination (Washington Post, 2024e). WaPo producer, Boykin, also lip-synced to the Jonas Brothers' song, “Burnin' Up,” to discuss new climate change data (Washington Post, 2024c); in this video, the news content was only conveyed via text on the screen, prioritizing the TikTok norm over the actual news content. Ultimately, WaPo clearly understands and is dedicated to creating humorous news content for TikTok. WaPo coupled sketches, parodies, and jokes with TikTok sounds/effects, making their news content platform appropriate and funny.

## Discussion and conclusion

This study sought to better understand how political and news humor manifest on TikTok (RQ1a) and how TikTok's features and norms impact if and how US news organizations position their content as humorous (RQ1b). Our analysis adds insight into the extent to which US news organizations have or have not adopted TikTok's humorous norms and the range of content and production choices that could lend to humorous interpretations. Several points warrant attention.

First, WaPo was the only news organization that explicitly attempted humorous content through parody, jokes, lip-syncing, and TikTok sounds and effects during our analysis period. The other news organizations ranged from making small production choices that added some levity to their news content to merely posting previously recorded news segments. From a humor perspective, this analysis suggests that US news organizations are perhaps capitalizing on *TikTok's* humorous and lighthearted ethos as their content strategy (see Grignon, 2022), rather than producing *actual* humorous content. That is, news organizations likely know TikTok's reputation for meme-based and entertaining content. And, because millions of users come to TikTok expecting entertaining/humorous content, news organizations may not feel the need to create new content. Rather, simply placing their prerecorded content in a lighthearted space may be the strategy in and of itself. Whereas traditional political humor is theorized to “piggyback” substantive political content to humor (Baum, 2002, p. 96), US news organizations may be piggybacking their news content to TikTok's platform identity.

Our analysis also provides insight into the production choices that can add levity to news content. News organizations included lighthearted music, peculiar sounds, and digital stickers/emojis in some of their TikToks. Although these production choices are not explicitly humorous, they could still instill feelings of mirth and ease the potential nervousness of consuming political content – similar to the process explained by relief theory (Meyer, 2000; Watson, 2014) – encouraging users to linger on the TikTok more than they might with straight news content. Importantly, whereas relief theory posits that humor leads to pleasure and relief, our analysis suggests that TikTok's digital features may trigger that relief; music, peculiar sounds, and stickers/emojis add to the overall entertainment/pleasurable value of news organizations' TikToks.

Finally, our analysis found that WaPo has a clear humorous orientation, which supports extant research (Klug, 2020; Newman, 2022) and numerous popular press discussions (Meek, 2021; Nover, 2019; Pellico, 2019). WaPo consistently combined comedy sketches with comical TikTok features, like the eyes and mouth effect. At face value, then, WaPo serves as a model for how TikTok news content can look given sufficient resources (e.g., a TikTok

production team) and a desire/willingness to incorporate a platform's features and norms into news reporting (see WashPostPR, 2021). News TikToks can be satirical, comedic, platform-specific, and culturally relevant. However, aligning with TikTok's humorous and technological norms does not necessarily mean WaPo's approach resonates with users. In fact, there are several TikTok realities that could impact how WaPo's TikToks are received. TikTok videos loop on an algorithmically curated and personalized FYP (Schellewald, 2023); therefore, WaPo's TikToks may find supportive FYP's, or at least users who interact with political content, enhancing the persuasive power of this humorous news content. However, youth humor on TikTok in the US is described as complex, layered, and fast-moving (Lloyd, 2023). Consequently, keeping up with TikTok norms, trends, and lingo likely takes an exorbitant amount of effort and time. And many attempts at humor on TikTok do not resonate with younger users (Cheong, 2023). Given humor's complex nature and TikTok's younger US demographic (Gottfried, 2024) future research should experimentally test whether such humorous attempts by news organizations yield more user engagement and the tenor of that engagement (e.g., positive/negative comments).

Ultimately, few US news organizations in our sample created explicitly humorous news content *for* TikTok. Still, that US news organizations post their prerecorded news segments to TikTok and use TikTok's digital features to add levity to their news content is noteworthy. Such practices reflect the continued influence of and expectations for infotainment, where news content converges with entertainment (Baym, 2015). At a minimum, then, placing news content in a humorous and entertaining space likely introduces TikTok users to content to which they otherwise might not be exposed. Importantly, US adults aged 18–29 are increasingly getting their news from TikTok (Masta, 2023). Therefore, US news organizations should post news content on TikTok to provide credible information to information seekers on the platform.

The chief limitation of this study is the limited sample size and US context. Future research should expand the sample of news organizations' TikToks to see if the trends observed represent the news organizations' full TikTok strategy and expand beyond US news organizations. Having a baseline understanding of US news organizations' TikTok content, future research should adopt survey and experimental designs to understand public perceptions and the effects of this TikTok content. Although relief theory provided a useful theoretical lens for this analysis given TikTok's entertaining ethos and short-video format, future research should assess US news humor through the lenses of incongruity theory or superiority theory. These theories, along with relief theory, might be particularly useful in an experimental context when assessing the effects of this TikTok news humor. For example, it may be the case that TikTok news humor, like that in WaPo's videos, might be effective because such videos are incongruous with typical news content (Gruner, 1967, 1997).

Finally, any TikTok study is limited by the rapidly changing TikTok trends/norms that likely affect what is considered humorous on the platform. Scholars thus periodically assess the changing norms and their influence on news content. For now, it is noteworthy that major US news organizations are on TikTok, and some have incorporated its features and norms.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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