

APPROPRIATION OF TIKTOK INTO NEWS PRODUCTION PROCESSES IN SELECTED COMMUNITY RADIO STATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract: The advent of digital technologies and more particularly social media platforms like TikTok, Facebook and X has spurred up intriguing possibilities for journalists and other media practitioners in the news production process. However, there is a paucity of studies that have examined how these technologies are being appropriated in news production in community media operating in subaltern spaces. In light of this background, this study examines how community radio stations in South Africa are appropriating TikTok in news production. Using *MADIBAZ Radio* and *Nkqubela FM* in the city of Gqeberha as case studies, and the concept of technological appropriation and participatory journalism as analytical lenses, this qualitative study, consisting of semi-structured interviews with journalists, and virtual ethnography, sought to understand how the two community radio stations are integrating TikTok in news production. The findings of the study indicate that journalists in the community radio space are integrating TikTok in news production processes. TikTok is mainly used in news dissemination and news production. Tik Tok is being harnesses to involve young audiences in news production by sharing community stories, photos, and videos, and WhatsApp audio voices. Our findings show that while social media platforms like Facebook, X, WhatsApp, and Instagram are mostly used for news gathering, TikTok is most useful for news dissemination because it allows for the interaction between journalists and their audiences. Other than news production processes, the study additionally found that both *MADIBAZ Radio* and *Nkqubela FM* also use TikTok to promote their radio stations to increase listenership, particularly among youth audiences.

Keywords: social media, tiktok, news production processes, participatory journalism, community radio stations, and South Africa

Introduction

Journalists in media outlets have increasingly transitioned from traditional news gathering, production, and dissemination of news content and incorporated social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok (Hendrickx, 2023). TikTok is presently considered one of the most popular social media platforms globally, featuring an enticing algorithm that represents an incessant flow of short and entertaining videos. It promotes user engagement through responses or duets, enabling users to replicate videos and incorporate themselves alongside the original video (Herman, 2019; Anderson, 2020; Newman, 2022). Many large businesses and nonprofit organisations have embraced the use of TikTok to facilitate and forge effective engagement with stakeholders and has transformed how brands promote their identity and engage with the audience at large (Wiley *et al.*, 2023; Suhardi *et al.*, 2024).

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The community radio industry is an evolving part of the broadcasting business that is fundamentally and conceptually different from public service and commercial radio platforms. Community radio station is widely known as a nonprofit broadcasting service that is owned and managed by the members of the community and maintains its participatory relationship with its community members, usually through trust, foundation, or association (Fraser and Estrada, 2001; Susan, 2021). According to Chiumbu (2014), community radio stations in the South African context have developed as part of the expansion of communicative spaces following the end of apartheid when the country implemented significant media upgrades. South Africa implemented three broadcasting systems that included public service (South Africa Broadcasting Corporation), commercial broadcasting, and community broadcasting.

With the advent of new technologies, social media platforms are being appropriated into news production processes, and in so doing reconfiguring the relationship between journalists and audiences (Matsilele *et al.*, 2023). These changes and innovations present a significant challenge to journalists in terms of news gathering, production, and reporting (Esa *et al.*, 2022). Unlike in the past where “news production was a process of taking events and transforming them into recognizable reports or news packages, employing the third person objective” (Knight and Cook, 2013:4), the changes in news production processes enable an ongoing connection between journalists and audiences through sharing of pictures, videos, and other content shared on social media platforms by the audience (Newman, 2009; Hermida, 2012; Bossio and Holon, 2021). The proliferation of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now known as social media X), WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and other technological tools have created intriguing possibilities for journalists, editors, and news producers in the news production processes. These innovative tools have altered news gathering, production, and dissemination (Newman *et al.*, 2011; Rodny-Gumede and Hyde-Clarke, 2014; Matsilele *et al.*, 2023).

The advanced developments in journalism practice are evolving as audiences become *prosumers*, meaning they are producing and consuming content mutinously (Mpofu, Matsilele and Moyo, 2023). The dynamic in news production processes continues as journalists have depicted enormous interest in TikTok where they create news and entertainment content while taking advantage of platform features and trends (Kitsa, 2024). Several scholars are optimistic that emerging technologies, rather than supplanting radio in developing regions, are creating novel opportunities for radio broadcasters and audiences, thereby revitalizing the potential of radio as a genuinely interactive medium (Gilberds and Myers, 2012; Matsilele *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, their online feedback can have an impact on the news production process”. Several scholars have paid attention to the appropriation of social media tools like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp into news production processes (See Makwambeni *et al.*, 2023; Matsilele *et al.*, 2023).

While previous studies have examined the appropriation of social media platforms like Facebook, X and Instagram into news programming, there is a paucity of studies that have examined how TikTok as a platform is being integrated into news production processes particularly in the community radio space. In light of this background, this paper examines the appropriation of TikTok into news production in two purposively selected community radio stations in South Africa. The paper further sought to understand how the appropriation of TikTok in news production processes is reconfiguring the

relationship between journalists and audiences. The specific questions the study examines are as follows:

- i. How are community radio stations appropriating TikTok in their news production processes?
- ii. How is the appropriation of social media re-configuring the relationship between journalists and their audiences?

Literature review

Appropriation of TikTok in News Production Processes

TikTok is the seventeen most popular and widely used application in the world, it is used for sharing short videos. These videos are tall and not square-shaped, just like videos on Instagram and Snapchat, and people may navigate through them by scrolling up and down, like a feed, rather than tapping or swiping side to side (Herman, 2019). At the beginning of 2024, TikTok was ranked as the 6th social media platform in the world (Hradziushka, Minchuk and Babuk, 2024). It has been proven that TikTok has immensely grown in popularity since its inception in September 2016, with young users particularly drawn to the app's videos for viewing, liking, and commenting. The users of TikTok also do challenges in which they specify which performance should be created by a large number of users, as a result, TikTok users mimic the content or engage with the original video (Montag, Yang, and Elhai, 202; Negreira-Rey, Vázquez-Herrero and López-García, 2022).

TikTok news studies have paid attention to how professional news outlets and journalists appropriate TikTok's unique social media logic for news gathering and dissemination (Neman, 2022; Negreira-Rey, 2022; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2024). According to Herrero, and López-García (2022); and Peterson-Salahuddin (2024) the appropriation of social media platforms by journalists is highly influenced by personal motivations and skills, as well by professional and social factors such as the members of the communities who depict more interest in discussing societal issues on digital media platforms. In Kitsa's study (2021:33) Journalists in Ukraine appropriate relatively new social media TikTok sparingly, primarily to "track celebrities' activities and whereabouts". While journalists in Germany have adopted established quality standards and content production for TikTok (Degen, Olgemöller and Zabel, 2024). However, the media outlets' TikTok content does not simply present news through dance; rather, they strategically promote their brands and offer glimpses behind the scenes in a relaxed, musical environment that resonates with the TikTok audience (Miller and Maddox, 2025).

Although there is a plethora of research articles on the appropriation of social media into news ecology, there is a paucity of articles concerning the integration of TikTok in news production processes particularly in South Africa. There is no comprehensive understanding of how journalists could use this social media platform for news gathering and dissemination. However, Peterson-Salahuddin (2024) admonishes journalists to pay attention to misinformation and fake news taking place on TikTok and also beckons journalists and other publishers to be vigilant of the content being distributed by the users of this platform which might mislead people.

Calvo-Gutiérrez and Marín-Lladó (2023) affirm that the emergence and proliferation of social media platforms have presented both opportunities and peril for journalists and communities at large. To an extent, false information is deteriorating, and fake news is thriving within the framework of populism. Contextualising the advent of TikTok and its prominence among the younger generation, it is pivotal to comprehend the impact of fake news consciousness within the demographic. Therefore, the definition of “fake news consciousness is perceived as an individual’s knowledge and recognition of the presence and prevalence of fake news in the media landscape” (Lan and Tung, 2024:4). The reason there is enormous fake news on TikTok is because of the citizen journalists who turn to produce their content because they want to gain more followers. In this paper citizen journalists are defined as news content created by nonprofessional journalists who share content in a variety of formats on TikTok such as short interactive videos accompanied by background music and allow multiple users to share the same content in other social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and act (Freiman, 2024).

Appropriation of other Social Media Platforms into News Production

The advent of social media and the use of internet in general has been playing a pivotal role in assisting radio stations to broadcast its content beyond the boarder of their provinces, and countries (Mare, 2013). Facebook and Twitter are the most prominent social media tools integrated into news production process; journalists have shown that these tools work efficiently for gathering and disseminating news (Paulussen and Harder, 2014; Kalsnes and Lasson, 2018; Matsilele *et al.*, 2023; Ajiogu *et al.*, 2024).

Makwambeni *et al.*, (2023) argue within a South African context that Twitter and Facebook are the two popular social media platforms that are predominantly reshaping news sourcing, production, and reporting in the community media space. The news production processes and practices have undergone a notable transformation due to the enhanced utilization of social media by the general public (Matsilele *et al.*, 2023). Susan (2021) posits that social media platforms have enabled communities with novel chances to disclose news concerning their local communities with journalists. The study also shows that WhatsApp has gained popularity for messaging news, and the figures are now significantly higher than other social media tools like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram (Boczek and Koppers, 2020).

According to Matsilele *et al.*, (2023, 134) WhatsApp is the popular social media platform particularly after the “third quarter of 2020 where a 93 percent of internet users in the country reported using the messaging app”. The freedom of expression and access to information through social media platforms have prolonged opportunities for participatory citizenship, by allowing the citizens to actively create and share information (Makwambeni *et al.*, 2023).

Conceptual framework of the Study

Our examination of the appropriation of TikTok in news production processes in the community radio space in South Africa is informed by the concept of technological appropriation as well as participatory journalism. The concept of technological appropriation, assists us to examine how TikTok is integrated into news production at the two-community radio station. The concept of participatory journalism allows us to understand how TikTok is reconfiguring the relationship between journalists and their audiences in the community radio space (Domingo *et al.*, 2008). A review of literature shows that a

number of studies have employed the concept of technological appropriation to examine the integration of technology into the news ecosystem (Matsilele, 2023; Yang and Stochl, 2020; Mabweazara and Mare, 2017).

The concept of technological appropriation is centred on the idea that when a technology is presented, a media outlet including journalists may accept and employ it in unique ways primarily influenced by the media houses' goals and objectives (Makwambeni and Makwambeni, 2024). The concept of technological appropriation avers that technology is adopted and modified by journalists within their professional practices to achieve their goals. Thus, this form of appropriation is synonymous with customisation, which strictly focuses on technology adoption patterns and deeper practice transformation. The concept views technology less as a vacuum, it requires a journalist, editors, and news presenters to use it appropriately to achieve the media houses' goals (Dourish, 2003; Orlikowski, 1995). Generally, studies on technological appropriation, when used in conjunction with information and communication technology (ICTs), generally perceive technology as having positive connotations. Thus, technological appropriation can be perceived as advantageous, beneficial, and positive to journalists, media outlets, and users of social media (Makwambeni and Makwambeni, 2024). Munoriyarwa *et al.*, (2021), used the concept of technological appropriation to understand and assess the extent to which artificial intelligence has been adopted in South African newsroom.

On the other hand, in journalism studies, the concept of "participation" represents how journalists engage with their audiences when constructing news (Vos and Thomas, 2024) Thus, the concept of participatory journalism has been envisioned as a practice whereby the audience is no longer merely receiving news but increasingly involved in the process of news production and dissemination (Borger, van Hoof and Sanders, 2019). In the era of digital technology, the rapid growth of Web 2.0 tools has created new avenues for public participation in news (Lawrence, Radcliffe and Schmidt, 2018). This paper conceptualizes participatory journalism as a process facilitated by modern collaborative digital technologies where the audience is increasingly involved in the process of news production and dissemination (Mabweazara and Mare, 2021). Participatory journalism focuses on how journalists can provide more opportunities for people to co-create journalism. It stems from the rapid adoption of technologies that allow previously passive audiences to create and share their content (Vos and Thomas, 2024). Mabweazara and Mare (2021) argue that there are interconnected ICT-driven forms of participatory practices namely automated participatory practice, and general technological affordances.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate how community radio stations in the province of Eastern Cape of South Africa are appropriating TikTok in their news production processes. A two-stage research design process was used to gather data to respond to the research questions. The first stage of the research design consisted of semi-structured interviews with programme managers, editors, news producers, and journalists of the two purposively selected community radio stations selected for the study: *MADIBAZ Radio* and *Nkqubela FM*. The two community radio stations were selected based on the target audiences and origins, language, and their savviness in appropriating TikTok in news production processes. While *MADIBAZ* radio focuses on diverse students, who are

young and active on social media platforms, *Nkqubela FM* broadcasts in both English and isiXhosa but primarily targets working-class people in the townships.

A total of 14 participants took part in the study using a purposive sampling strategy between August to October 2024. The data collected through semi-structured interviews from the participants drawn from the two community radio stations were triangulated with data collected through qualitative content analysis from the community radio stations and participants TikTok accounts. The participants' contribution to the study was confidential; the participants' anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through withholding their names and identities during data collection, analysis, and reporting phases. The data from the qualitative content analysis offered insight into both the use of TikTok in news production and engagement with audiences (See Melissa and Lisa, 2019; Kiger and Varpio, 2020; Hallenbeck, 2021). The data collected was further analysed through thematic content analysis and related to the literature reviewed and the conceptual framework of the study. Furthermore, qualitative content was used to analyse the responses from the study participants on the appropriation of TikTok in news production processes in the two community radio stations in South Africa, and TikTok as a social media tool for the two radio stations to engage with audiences.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study confirm that social media is changing news production practices in the community radio space in South Africa (Makwambeni et al, 2023). *MADIBAZ Radio* and *Nkqubela FM* are appropriating TikTok in news production processes to enhance communication with their audiences in and around Gqeberha. Tik Tok has also re-configured the relationship between journalists and audiences from a paternalistic one to one characterised by mutual dependence. These findings resonate with Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey and López-García's (2022) observation that TikTok is becoming highly influential in news production processes which are adapting to the logic of platform in a context marked by the incidental consumption of news, virality and the intermediation of technology.

Appropriation of TikTok for news promotion

Previous studies have shown how social media is being appropriated at the newsgathering, news processing and news dissemination levels in the news production process. Our findings indicate that while TikTok has been embraced for news sourcing and dissemination levels in the two community radio stations, it also serves a key role of promoting the content to audiences on social media. This emergent role of TikTok, which has not been foregrounded in previous studies, is aptly captured by the program managers of the community radio stations below:

“We are using TikTok to promote our *MADIBAZ Radio*'s brand; we want our target audience to know that are also found and available on TikTok rather than Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and live radio. We are promoting all of our programs including news programs in a sophisticated manner through using TikTok, and I can attest that our listeners are engaging very well with our presenters on this platform”.

“Although TikTok is not a social media platform at *Nkqubela FM*. The marketing department and other individuals such as radio presenters, and journalists have adopted this tool to promote our radio

station and their shows. We cannot avoid the fact that people are using TikTok to produce their content, and that also forces us to adopt all these new digital media technologies including TikTok in our daily broadcasting”.

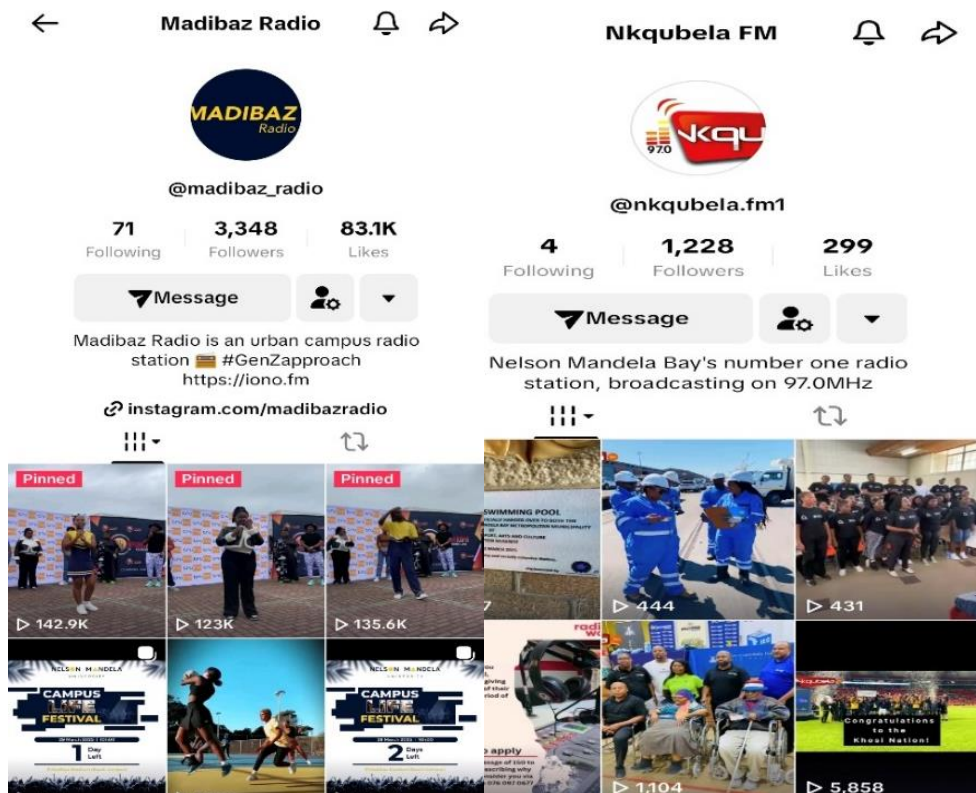


Figure 1: Illustrate the TikTok accounts for the two community radio stations namely, *MADIBAZ Radio* and *Nkqubela FM*.

As depicted in the above pictures, community radio stations in South Africa have embraced Tik Tok as a promotional tool as reflected in extensive number of followers gained. While *MADIBAZ Radio* has 3348 followers and 83.1 Million likes, *Nkqubela FM* has 1228 followers and 299 likes. This emergent role of Tik Tok in the community radio space resonate with studies that show that several companies are adopting Tik Tok for marketing, advertising, and promotion purposes. The social media platform serves as a powerful weapon to increased awareness and promote brand identity (Hasim and Sherlina, 2022; Maulana and Sandyawati, 2023).

TikTok as a news source

Previous studies have shown that journalists are increasingly appropriating social media platforms such as X and Facebook for news gathering (Matsilele et al, 2013; Mare, 2013). The findings emerging from this study indicate that journalists in the two community radio stations are incorporating Tik Tok into news production processes by using it as a news source. They invariably use Tik Tok, alongside other social media platforms like X and Facebook, as a news source for content for their radio programmes,

and a critical avenue for generating story ideas. This emergent role of Tik Tok in news production processes is captured in the quotes below:

“I primarily use TikTok for content purposes; However, when it comes to social media tools that I use as a journalist, I also utilise Facebook, X, and Instagram because that is where campiness distributes newsworthy information about their events. There’s no need for me to travel around looking for stories; instead, social media is the most effective platform for gathering information”.

“Everyday day in the morning, I look at the new trends on TikTok, then investigate the concept and the meaning of the trend and organise the interviews with people who have more followers, likes, and comments engagement on the trend. Although it takes some time for me to verify the information, TikTok is very helpful in my journalism practice”.

The critical role that TikTok is playing in news production in the community radio space in South Africa reinforces Peterson-Salahuddin (2024) observation that TikTok has become an integral tool for finding and sharing news information particularly among younger audiences. This role also resonates with the key postulates of the concept of technological appropriation that when a technology is deployed, people may accept and employ it in unique ways primarily influenced by their goals and objectives (Makwambeni and Makwambeni, 2024). As evidenced in the findings, TikTok influencers have for example become a critical news sources and news experts interviewed in news bulletins. This unintended shift in news practices disrupts traditional news practises where news experts for example were sourced from established and credible institutions.

Appropriating Tik Tok for news dissemination

Our findings also show that TikTok is being appropriated as a critical tool for news dissemination by the two community radio stations in South Africa. It allows journalists and the radio stations to disseminate news more widely especially among younger audiences. This role that TikTok is playing within the news production process is reflected by quotes from journalists from the two community radio stations:

“Tik Tok has enabled us journalists in the community media space to preserve our limited resources, especially for traveling. Using this app helps me to reach a wider audience and make them aware of the radio station. It’s very important to get constructive feedback from your strangers, the comments that are provided by my TikTok followers help in reflection and in making decisions regarding the improvement of news broadcasting”.

“As a news bulletin reader within *MADIBAZ Radio*, I’ve gained a lot of TikTok followers, and they always tell me to do more live videos while I am busy reading news. I also adopted that strategy because I have seen seasoned news readers using TikTok to read news such as uTatu Siyavuya Neke, Lisakhanya Pepe, namanye ke amaqhawe namaqhawekazi endingawafanisa noMamu Noxolo Grootboom”.



Figure 2: The *MADIBAZ Radio* news presenter who became prominent in the community through appropriating TikTok while reading news and inspired by a South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC 1) newsreader Mr Siyavuya Neke.

The quotes above show that TikTok has become integrated in the news production processes in the two radio stations. It is used as a critical channel for disseminating news as well as a critical source of feedback from audiences. The input gleaned from Tik Tok is fed back into the news production process to improve news production as a whole. Tik Tok also provide key affordances that enhance user interaction and engagement which fundamentally reconfigure traditional news production processes (see Cheng and Li, 2024). TikTok's integration in news production processes in the community radio space in South Africa reflects broader shifts in news production processes brought about by new technology and social media platforms observed in previous studies (see Mare, 2013; Matsilele et al, 2023).

TikTok and the reconfiguration of the relationship between Journalists and their audiences

The appropriation of TikTok into news production processes at the two community radio stations in South Africa is reconfiguring how journalists and their audiences engage. The findings analysed in the study show that TikTok and other social media platforms like X and Facebook have ushered in participatory journalism where audiences are no longer passive recipients of news but increasingly involved in the process of news production and dissemination (see Borger, van Hoof and Sanders, 2019). TikTok has disrupted traditional news processes by allowing audiences to engage with news producers and invariable shape what becomes news and how the news is disseminated. As shown in the quote below audiences get to influence the news agenda through what like and ultimately trends on TikTok:

“Everyday day in the morning, I look at the new trends on TikTok, then investigate the concept and the meaning of the trend and organise the interviews with people who have more followers, likes, and comments engagement on the trend”.

Besides shaping what becomes news, journalists now have a more dialogic and mutual dependent relationships with news producers. Through this relationship, they can directly provide insights that are used to reflect on news content and inform what becomes news in future coverage in the two community radio stations:

“It’s very important to get constructive feedback from your strangers, the comments that are provided by my TikTok followers help in reflection and in making decisions regarding the improvement of news broadcasting.”



Figure 3: A news presenter from *Nkqubela FM* interacts with followers on TikTok.

While in the past, news production as a process was largely an inscrutable process, TikTok provides audiences with more power and direct access to journalists. Through this access, audiences are able to enforce media accountability and verification of news something that was largely impossible with traditional media before the onset of social media and new digital technologies (see Matsilele et al, 2023). This level of participation by audiences takes away the power that journalists had in the past:

“The use of TikTok has brought the audience into news reporting, the audience highly participates and provides constructive feedback in our news reading”.

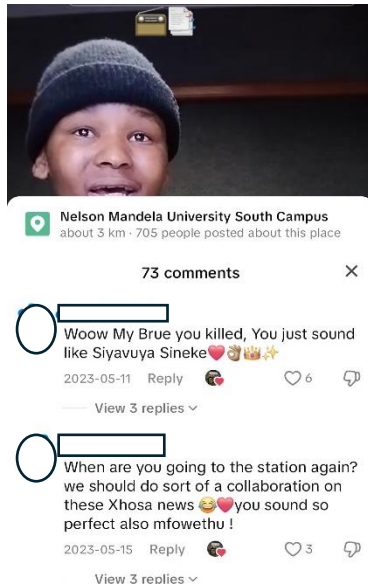


Figure 4: Shows the *MADIBAZ Radio* news presenter receiving positive feedback from the TikTok users while reading news.

Thus, new digital technologies and social media have promoted participatory journalism by creating novel avenues for audience engagement, enabling the public to interact more swiftly and profoundly through online commentary, content sharing, reacting, or critiquing news. According to Gjoni (2017) these novel ways of engagement have also altered patterns of participation established by traditional media. The new forms of engagement that have emerged as a result of new digital technologies and social media platforms like TikTok are depicted in the sentiments of a journalist who participated in the study:

“It looks like the audience is slowly avoiding the use of contacting the radio station’s landline, which we assume is due to a lack of airtime. Instead, they tag us journalists into trending videos, which I believe they are doing simply because they know we always follow the stories we are tagged into. To be quite frank, I like what they are doing because it demonstrates that they still value the power and influence of investigative journalism.”

Conclusion

This study sought to examine the appropriation of TikTok into news production processes in selected community radio stations in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. It also sought to understand how the integration of TikTok in news production processes is re-configuring the relationship between journalists and their audiences. The study extends previous studies by Mare (2013) and Matsilele et al., (2023) that have examined the appropriation of social media platforms into news production platforms by media institutions in South Africa. The findings of the study show that community radio stations in South Africa have appropriated TikTok for news promotion, news sourcing, news production, news verification and news dissemination as part of the broader news production process. Notably, TikTok alongside other media platforms like Facebook, X, WhatsApp, and Instagram have become integrated into a new media ecology. The study findings also show that TikTok has reconfigured the relationship

between journalists and audiences in the community media space by ushering in participatory journalism, where audiences are no longer passive recipients of news by key role players in the news production process. These findings reinforce findings of previous studies (see Matsilele et al., 2023) that have shown that social media has empowered audiences and forced journalists to cede power in a reconfigured news production ecology. Future studies may need to examine the appropriation of TikTok and other understudied platforms like WhatsApp in mainstream media news production processes in the global South to understand the different ways in which these technologies are appropriated in different social historical contexts.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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