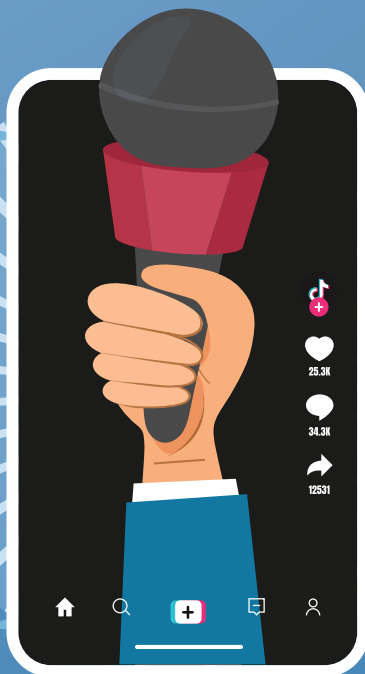


TIKTOK IS THE MEDIUM, TIKTOK IS THE MESSAGE

HOW CAN TIKTOK BECOME A VITAL PLATFORM IN ELECTIONS?





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INTRODUCTION

This year's election belongs to TikTok. This is the narrative that has been widely used in the U.S. media ahead of the 2024 U.S. presidential election. The existence of this social media platform from China is currently a dilemma for U.S. politicians. On March 13, 2024, the United States House of Representatives officially passed a bill that would block TikTok.¹ A total of 352 lawmakers voted in favor of the bill, while only 65 voted against it.² Most of the members who voted in favor argued that TikTok had the potential to misuse the data of its U.S.-based users for the interests of the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party.

This accusation has not been proven.³ It has sparked protests from some 140 million TikTok users in the United States, most of whom are teenagers, as well as from various elements of civil society.⁴ The blocking of TikTok has the potential to cause the current incumbent, Joe Biden, and the Democratic Party to lose the votes of nearly 50% of the total population of the United States. The majority of the lost votes will come from voters under the age of 35. In fact, in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, voters under 35 years of age played a major role in the victory of Joe Biden and the Democratic Party.⁵ The dilemma of blocking TikTok was expressed more pessimistically by potential competitors of Joe Biden and the Democratic Party in the upcoming 2024 United States presidential election, namely Donald Trump and the Republican Party. "I think it would be foolish to oppose TikTok in an election year," said Alex Bruesewitz, a Republican social media consultant.⁶



The dilemma in the United States is not unfounded. TikTok has been shown to play a major role in influencing public opinion in several previous elections. The influence of TikTok was then used by several candidates to direct the public to become voters during the election. This method is effective even when the candidate has a poor track record and image. Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr. used TikTok to win the presidency in the 2022 Philippine elections.⁷ In Indonesia, TikTok is one of the tools for Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka to win the 2024 presidential election.⁸ Several right-wing politicians in Europe are also using TikTok to reach potential young voters in this year's elections in their respective countries.

All three might have different political contexts. Their political strategy may also be different at some level. However, there are similarities in the discourse they put out on their campaign TikTok accounts. To cover up his family's track record of corruption and violations, Bongbong Marcos spread disinformation that glorified the policies and legacy of the dictatorial government of Ferdinand Marcos Sr or his own father.⁹ This disinformation is also spiced with discourses on the personal lives of the Bongbong family, who are framed as celebrities close to the people rather than a family that lived through a past dictatorship.



Source: @bongbong.marcos TikTok Account

In Indonesia, TikTok is able to become a medium for counter-narratives against Prabowo's image and track record as a human rights violator, as well as to bury the discourse of constitutional violations in the process of Gibran's nomination as vice presidential candidate. Framing the two as a cuddly presidential and vice presidential pair was able to cover up their bad image and track record in front of the potential voters.¹⁰ Meanwhile, right-wing politicians in Europe avoid discussing politics, such as program plans or policies, on their TikTok accounts. Instead, like Bongbong Marcos, they reveal their personal lives to avoid discussing criticism of right-wing policies by left-wing politicians while trying to gain votes from potential voters under the age of 35, many of whom are active on TikTok.¹¹

Efforts to counter disinformation by these candidates have already been made in the case of the Philippines and Indonesia. For example, the Philippine alternative online media outlet Rappler published a series of investigations exposing the Marcos family's propaganda on social media in 2019.¹² In Indonesia, the film "Dirty Vote," which exposed fraud in the 2024 election, including by the Prabowo-Gibran ticket, was successfully broadcasted on YouTube a few days before the election. These efforts were thwarted when Bongbong Marcos and Prabowo-Gibran went on to win the election.



Source: @DirtyVote YouTube Channel

Many people are then confused to explain the power of the message in the disinformation spread by these candidates through social media platforms, especially TikTok. Several users of the X, one of the platforms that is considered quite critical of the Prabowo-Gibran pair, believe that the weak political education of the people means that most voters are unable to digest the disinformation and image of the pair. This argument was also echoed by scholar Ulil Abshar Abdalla, who specifically criticized Indonesian intellectuals because they were considered distant from the people and therefore lacked political education.¹³ However, this argument can be refuted by looking at voter survey data from Kompas Research and Development, which shows that the number of voters for the Prabowo-Gibran pairing from the highly educated group is much higher than for the other two pairings. So what is it that makes these messages full of disinformation have such a big impact? Perhaps the answer to this confusion lies not in looking at the message alone, but in looking at the medium through which the message is delivered.

MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

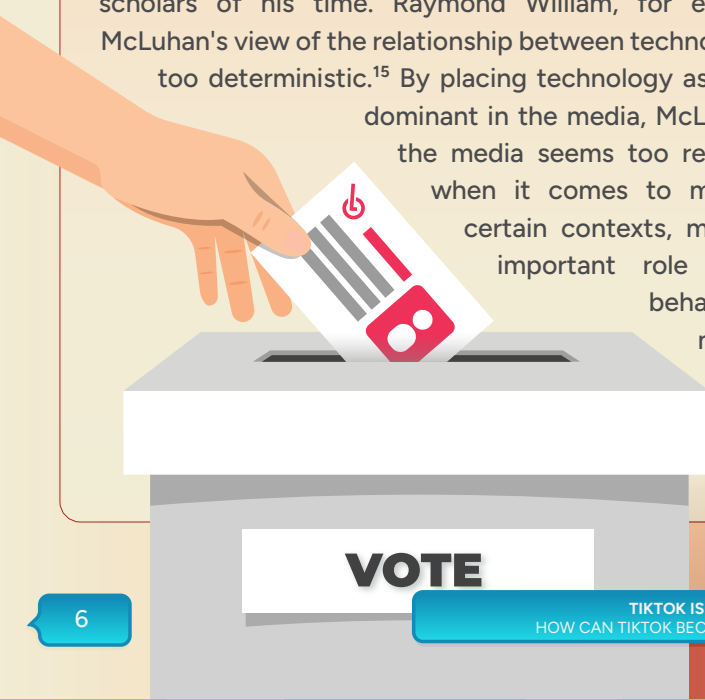
"The medium is the message" is the most often quoted sentence of the Canadian communication scientist Marshall McLuhan. In his work *Understanding Media*, McLuhan criticized the approaches of communication scholars who tend to emphasize the importance of message analysis methods for media, such as content analysis, discourse analysis, framing analysis, and so on.¹⁴ According to him, the characteristics of a medium can determine the way a message is formed, delivered and received by the public. The way a medium determines the delivery of this message then directly influences the

delivery of this message then directly influences the formation of thought patterns, actions, and interactions among people who are exposed to the media.



In analyzing the characteristics of a medium, McLuhan created a typology of hot and cold media. Hot media refers to media that have the characteristic of preventing or minimizing the involvement of media consumers in the production of their messages. In the early days of his book, McLuhan used radio and newspapers as examples of hot media. For McLuhan, radio and newspapers did not provide much space for listeners and readers to help shape the messages they conveyed. On the other hand, McLuhan used television and the telephone as examples of cold media. Television and the telephone, for McLuhan, always require the viewer or user to be actively involved in the transmission of the message.

McLuhan's views were criticized by various media and communication scholars of his time. Raymond William, for example, argues that McLuhan's view of the relationship between technology and the media is too deterministic.¹⁵ By placing technology as an entity that is too dominant in the media, McLuhan's explanation of the media seems too reductionist, especially when it comes to messages. In fact, in certain contexts, messages still play an important role in shaping human behavior through the media. Abandoning the message and focusing entirely on the medium



only brings us back to the explanatory model McLuhan criticized, namely a reductionist and partial explanation of the media. In addition, Donald Fishman also criticized McLuhan's dichotomy of cold and hot media. According to Fishman, McLuhan's dichotomy lacks detail so that the boundaries between cold and hot media are not very clear, especially when brought into the current context where many types of media have proliferated.¹⁶

Although McLuhan's explanation of the media received much criticism in his day, it gained relevance several decades later. As the Internet became widely used by the public in the 1990s, McLuhan's "the medium is the message" argument resonated loudly. In 1964, McLuhan stated that the presence of electronic media, as a kind of cold medium, would allow human beings to expand their existence. Electronic media makes humans capable of using a brain outside of the body. The brain of outside the body in McLuhan's understanding refers to electronic media that are able to supplement human cognitive functions. Electronic media will also trigger rapid media development, thereby rapidly changing human behavior. McLuhan predicted that the media would turn people into nomadic information gatherers.



The background of the page features a stylized illustration of the United States Capitol building in white with blue columns and windows. A large, rounded red speech bubble with a white cloud-like top is positioned in the upper half of the page, containing two paragraphs of text. The sky is a light blue gradient with white clouds. The bottom of the page has a green grassy area with some dark green bushes.

The media will no longer be treated as a single source of information, but as a tool for seeking multiple sources of information at once. McLuhan's description is very relevant to the characteristics of today's online media, which rely heavily on the Internet as the messenger.

The relevance of McLuhan's ideas to today's online media can also be heard in his explanation of the global village. The presence of electronic media, as a kind of cold medium, will integrate specific and particular human social realities globally. McLuhan saw that the electronic media of his time, such as television and the telephone, were a kind of cold media capable of connecting different individuals from different parts of the world. The presence of the cold media causes the fragmentation caused by the hot media to be reintegrated. This integration will become stronger so that people will be able to live in a global village connected by media. McLuhan seems to have failed to predict the other side of this global integration, namely the differences mediated by the media. These mediated differences certainly have the potential for conflict in addition to the potential for integration. However, it is hard to deny that McLuhan's description of the global village is also relevant to the reality of today's online media.

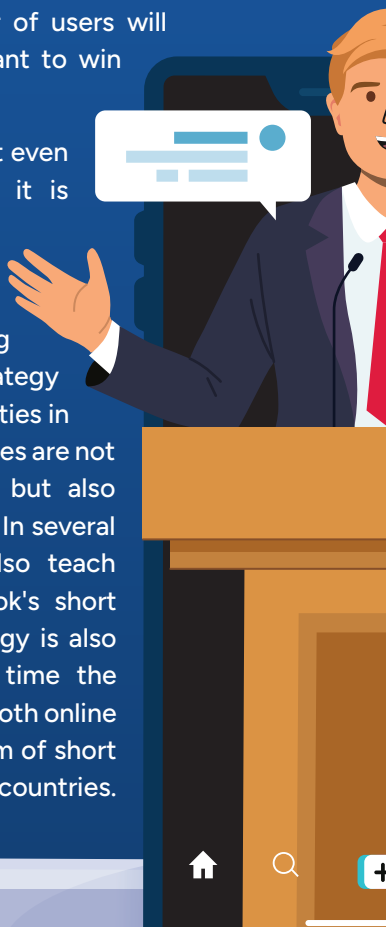
The background features a stylized illustration of the United States Capitol building in white with blue columns and windows, set against a blue sky with white clouds. A large, dark red speech bubble with a white outline is positioned in the upper right, containing the main text. The text is in a white, sans-serif font. The overall style is clean and modern, typical of digital media or educational graphics.

Regardless of its relevance, an important part of McLuhan's thinking is his analytical framework for viewing media. If the study of media is dominated by message analysis, then medium analysis is certainly something that should not be overlooked. In the context of the relationship between TikTok and elections, the medium becomes an object of analysis that escapes discussion. Media observers and researchers are too focused on looking at the messages conveyed in each political content on TikTok, but forget to analyze the characteristics of TikTok as a medium. Messages that can polish problematic candidates through TikTok are indeed an object of urgent analysis. However, the medium that can make these image-polishing messages successful is also in urgent need of analysis. Using McLuhan's analytical framework, we can understand that the same message is formed, delivered, and received in different ways on each social media platform. So what makes TikTok able to shape and deliver the message that problematic candidates want, and then be able to get the public to accept what they want?

TIKTOK AS A MEDIUM

By early 2024, TikTok is expected to reach 2 billion users worldwide, competing with WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube.¹⁷ Indonesia is the country with the second largest number of users in the world, namely 106 million people, after the United States with 143 million users.¹⁸ This fantastic number is one of the characteristics of TikTok media that has made politicians in both countries consider it in election campaigns. Kellyton Brito and Paulo Adeodato found a positive correlation between the number of users of a social media platform and the vote share of a candidate.¹⁹ Social media with a large number of users will always be a fertile field for politicians who want to win elections.

Another special characteristic of TikTok is that even though its user base is already quite large, it is expected to continue to grow. Yuchen Wang's research found that TikTok's growing popularity is due to unique marketing strategies and content personalization using artificial intelligence.²⁰ TikTok's marketing strategy always involves working with well-known celebrities in a country that is its target market. These celebrities are not only present as verbal promoters of TikTok, but also popularize the specific features that TikTok has. In several advertisements, TikTok's celebrity partners also teach potential TikTok users how to maximize TikTok's short video creation and editing features. This strategy is also combined with holding regular events each time the TikTok application is updated. These events are both online and offline. Offline events typically take the form of short video contests held in TikTok's target market countries.



Celebrities who have partnered with TikTok will usually attend to liven up the event. Online events usually involve providing games such as the once-popular "Shake". This online event is also promoted directly by the celebrity partnering with TikTok.

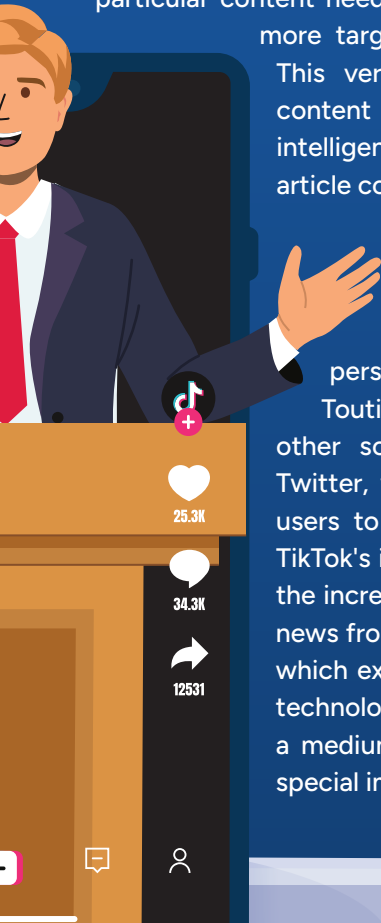


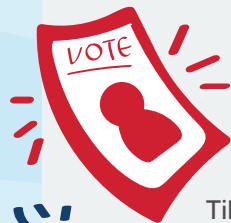
Li Xu, Xiaohui Yan, and Zhengwu Zhang found that TikTok's specific use of artificial intelligence was able to track and understand users' specific and particular content needs.²¹ As a result, TikTok may be able to provide

more targeted content across classes and generations.

This very specific yet very even personalization of content is possible because TikTok uses artificial intelligence technology that belongs to the Toutiao news article collection and selection application, both of which are under the control of TikTok's parent company, ByteDance.²² What makes Toutiao artificial intelligence special is its machine learning system, which is truly capable of personally reading users' content preferences.²³

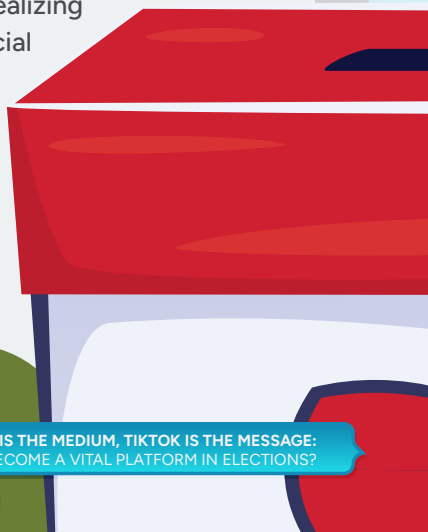
Toutiao's machine learning is different from some other social media platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, which still rely on social connections between users to read content preferences. The superiority of TikTok's information delivery mechanism is evidenced by the increase in the number of social media users seeking news from this application compared to Facebook and X, which experienced a decline.²⁴ This artificial intelligence technology is another specific feature that makes TikTok a medium for creating and delivering messages with a special impact compared to other social media.





In addition to relying on Toutiao as its specific artificial intelligence, TikTok also uses various market research methods to synchronize its content with users' preferences. ByteDance combines various marketing research methods that are the mainstay of major social media, such as Instagram, YouTube and Vine. Using Instagram, YouTube and Vine as references, TikTok encourages its users to continuously produce their own content instead of just being viewers. TikTok then encourages its users to share their videos with other users who are their colleagues. This not-so-original method has allowed TikTok to better understand its users' preferences, while expanding its user base through the sharing feature.

By paying close attention to user preferences, TikTok's content is able to make a special impression on its users. One special impression that can be directly felt by users is the addictive effect. Research by Aliaksandra Shutsko found that the personalization of TikTok content means that users are often immersed in it for long periods of time.²⁵ We may often find our colleagues who use TikTok, or even ourselves, spending hours scrolling through content on TikTok without realizing it. This phenomenon can occur because social media content designed around user preferences provides endless enjoyment. This never-ending fun blurs social media users' perception of time.²⁶



In the context of TikTok, someone may feel that watching five short videos is enough the first time. However, in subsequent uses, five videos will not be enough to produce the same level of dopamine as in the first use. As a result, TikTok will encourage its users to use it longer and more often.²⁷

Another impression that TikTok gives to its users is the "magic" of short video content, which is a special feature of this platform. Several studies have found the effect of short TikTok-style videos under 10 minutes on human brain capacity. A research found that TikTok's short video content has an addictive effect that can reduce the user's ability to concentrate.²⁸ Meanwhile, another research found that watching a large amount and variety of short video content over a long period of time can reduce a person's ability to create, store, and retrieve memories.²⁹ Romy Siehoff also found that informational content on TikTok tends to be difficult to critically and deeply digest due to the short duration of the video.³⁰ The long-term effect is that users become accustomed to swallowing digital information without critical and deep digestion. This condition has also made TikTok a fertile field for politicians who are more focused on disseminating gimmicks and manipulating the masses to improve their image.



TikTok users who easily get hooked for hours, experience addiction, and feel a decrease in critical faculties are not only caused by preference-based content. Another feature of TikTok is its ease of access. Compared to other short video-based social media, TikTok has a user interface that is simpler and easier to access. For example, Instagram reels and YouTube shorts are just one type of content among other types of content on both platforms. Meanwhile, short videos have become the main content on TikTok. This simplicity means that users are not confused when accessing and navigating content on TikTok. Meanwhile, short videos have become the main content on TikTok. This simplicity means that users are not confused when accessing and navigating content on TikTok.

When it comes to content creation, TikTok offers more convenience and completeness than other platforms. Video editing features on TikTok include filters, special effects, background music and audio, and additional text. While Instagram reels offers nearly as many editing features, it still lags behind in terms of effects and music. YouTube Shorts also offers editing tools, but only for basic editing. Professional editing of YouTube shorts still relies on external applications, just like general video content on YouTube.

The background of the page features a stylized illustration. On the left, a person's head is replaced by the TikTok logo, and they are wearing a blue suit and tie. Below this, a crowd of dark blue silhouettes is shown from the chest up, with several individuals holding up their phones to record. The entire scene is set against a light blue background with subtle geometric patterns.

Interaction between users on TikTok is also convenient and varied. Other social media still focus on simple user interactions such as comments, likes and shares. Those social media still rely on interactions outside the application to initiate collaboration. A study found that features that make interaction easier on TikTok can strengthen parasocial relationships between content creators and viewers.³¹ The parasocial relationships that are strengthened as a result of TikTok's features are often used by celebrities and influencers to increase their popularity through the application. In the context of a political campaign, election candidates will usually create their image as someone who is close to potential voters.³² This image of closeness is usually built by giving a picture of themselves as an ordinary person, who has a life like a potential voter.³³

An image that contains an image “ordinary people” make potential voters feel like they have an artificial closeness to the candidate. One form of this parasocial relationship can be observed from the phenomenon of many Indonesian TikTok users sharing content crying after the debate between Indonesian presidential candidates towards the 2024 election. The crying content was intended to show their sympathy for Prabowo, who during the debate was attacked by two other presidential candidates.

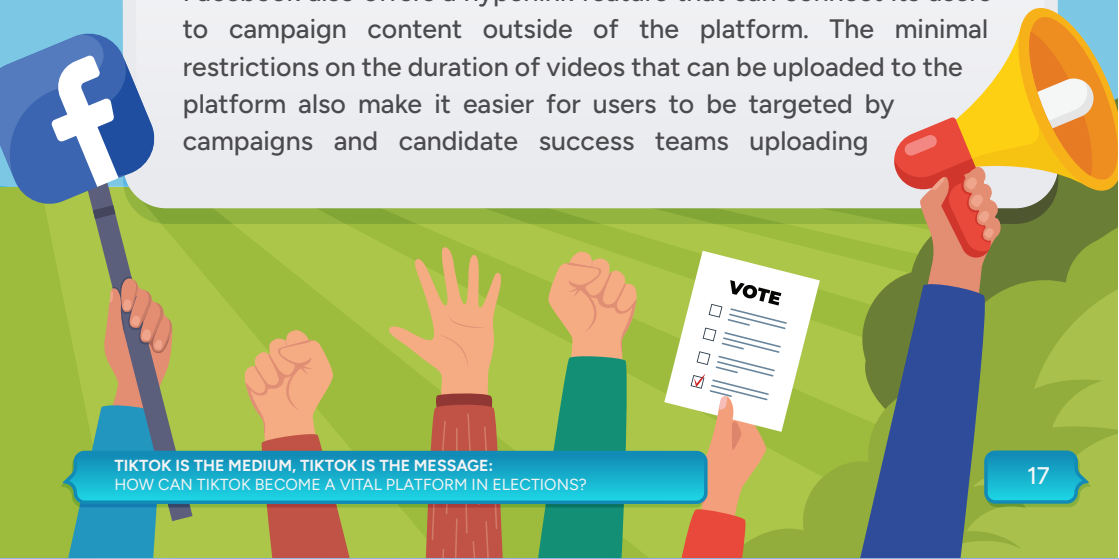


The accessibility of social media users turns out to be related to their use in political campaigns. The ease of access to social media is called technological affordance. Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport define technological affordance as "the use of a technology that is qualitatively easier than other technologies".³⁴ Ease of technological affordance is usually measured by the ease of individual acts of expression, collaboration, and interaction on social media.³⁵ These conveniences, as discussed earlier, are present in TikTok, so this application can be said to have high technological affordance compared to other social media.

The relationship between the technological affordance of social media and its effectiveness in political campaigns can be found in Michael Bossetta's research. By analyzing the use of Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat in the 2016 United States election, Bossetta found that technological affordance is positively correlated with election outcomes.³⁶ There are at least three findings that support Bossetta's argument.

First, while the content of campaign content is largely the same across platforms, the characteristics of the content vary. These differences are made to accommodate the uniqueness and characteristics of users on each social media platform.

Second, Facebook became the dominant platform in the 2016 U.S. election. This is because Facebook has a public page that displays many important accounts and is easy to search and identify. Facebook also offers a hyperlink feature that can connect its users to campaign content outside of the platform. The minimal restrictions on the duration of videos that can be uploaded to the platform also make it easier for users to be targeted by campaigns and candidate success teams uploading



Third, less dominant platforms, in this case Instagram and Snapchat, remain a concern for the campaign team. This platform is still being considered because the campaign team recognizes that there are special needs that Facebook cannot address, but Instagram and Snapchat can. Instagram is useful for polishing a candidate's visual image. Not only does the platform's design provide a lot of space for visual content, but it is also compatible with scheduled content production systems. Snapchat, on the other hand, has the ability to produce content in the form of live broadcasting, which can facilitate direct interaction between candidates and the public. This live broadcasting feature is not stored on the platform, so it is able to erase digital traces that could harm candidates during the election.

By understanding the relationship between the technological affordances of a social media platform and the effectiveness of political campaigns, TikTok's advantages as a political machine can be mapped. TikTok's ease of access, both for viewers and content producers, makes it a social media platform with good technological affordance. The use of TikTok in elections in several countries shows a positive correlation between TikTok's technological affordance and election results. Together with other specific characteristics, such as the growing number of users, strong content personalization, and content models that affect users' cognitive activities, TikTok has become a political tool that is difficult for politicians, especially problematic politicians, to ignore.

EMANCIPATORY POLITICS IN TIKTOK

By positioning itself as a medium is as important as the message, TikTok seems to have special characteristics that make it vital for politicians during election times. The number of users is nearly the same as major social media platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp, making it an ideal platform to reach potential voters. Customized content personalization based on artificial intelligence allows this platform to reach audiences across classes, cultures, and other backgrounds. This is difficult for other social media platforms, which may have many users, but their user groups tend to be specific. The content format of short videos also makes TikTok a fertile field for politicians with political strategies full of gimmicks and minimal substance.

A stylized illustration of a megaphone, colored in shades of green and yellow, pointing towards the right. It is positioned on the left side of the page, partially overlapping the text area.

Although various electoral experiences show that TikTok mostly benefits politicians with poor track records and gimmicky political strategies, the emancipatory power of TikTok should not be underestimated. Ioana Literat and Neta Kligler-Vilenchik showed that since its launch in 2016, TikTok has gradually become a platform for young people's political expression on crucial issues such as climate change, employment, and so on.³⁷

TikTok is able to become an emancipatory platform for young people because of the characteristics of young people's political actions themselves. When young people decide to get involved in a political movement, they usually pay attention to other young people's opinions about the political movement.³⁸ Thus, TikTok has become a platform for young people to share their political views with each other.



TikTok is able to become a platform for young people to share their political views due to more or less the same factors that make TikTok a favorite of problematic politicians. TikTok's marketing strategy model fits the lifestyle of young people, who are closely connected to celebrity life and pop culture. TikTok's personalization of content makes it easier for young people to find individuals or groups who share their political views. TikTok's concise and fast content model also fits the content preferences of young people, who are increasingly interested in short content.³⁹

Several models of social movements mediated by TikTok can be observed in several issues that develop and go viral through TikTok. The virality of an African American dancer, Morgan Bullock, who performed an Irish dance on TikTok in 2020, sparked a widespread discussion about cultural appropriation versus cultural "appreciation" on social media. Bullock was initially criticized by several netizens for being deemed to have committed cultural appropriation by performing an Irish dance on TikTok, despite not being of Irish descent. However, as the video went viral, Bullock had the opportunity to defend herself against the accusations of cultural appropriation. She then referred to what he was doing as cultural "appreciation" rather than cultural appropriation. Culture, with Bullock's practices of representation, becomes something inclusive rather than exclusive. Eleanor O'Leary found that the discourse that developed on TikTok about Bullock's Irish dance had a small effect on the structural dimensions of the causes of cultural discrimination, but a huge cultural effect.⁴⁰

The resistance against Israeli colonialism in Palestine also uses TikTok as a political tool to gain international support. Both parties use the ByteDance application to express their positions and interests. Moran Yarchi and Lilian Boxban-shabai's research found that campaigns by pro-Palestinian accounts on TikTok were able to garner sympathy in the midst of global structural conditions that are more favorable to Israel.⁴¹ Messages conveyed through the medium of TikTok about the struggle of the Palestinian people can become an intertextual political medium. This means that TikTok does not act as the main source of information, but as a complement or link between one piece of information and another. TikTok's advantages in its accessibility aspect make this intertextuality function appear.



Source: Moran Yarchi and Lilian Boxban-shabai's documentation.

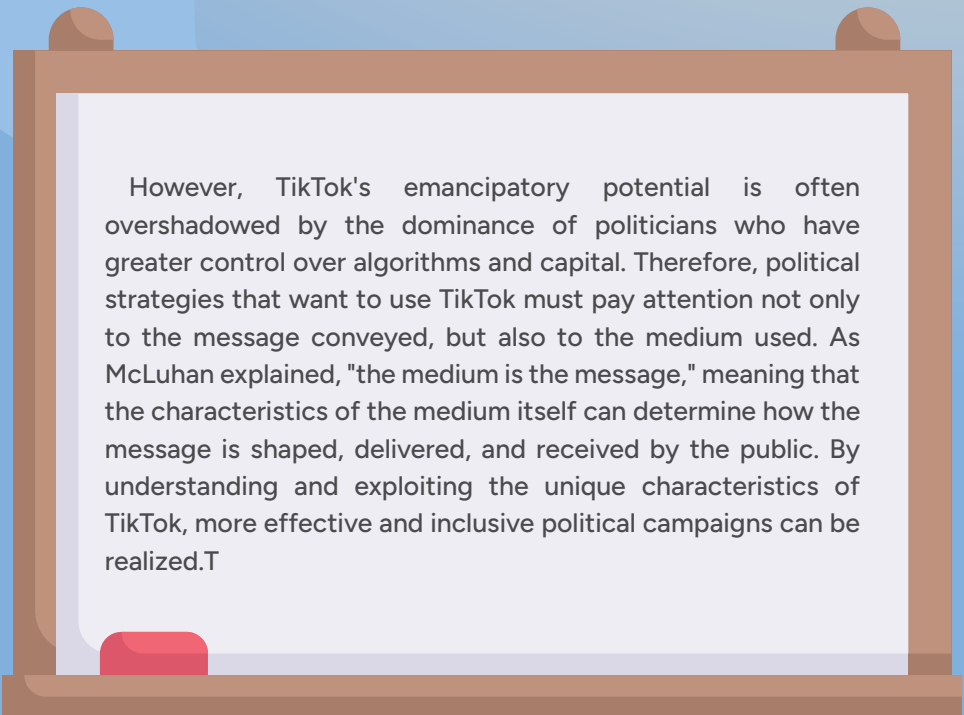
In the end, the various characteristics of TikTok as a medium for conveying messages do not necessarily make it a degenerative platform. There are potentials in TikTok that allow it to become an emancipatory political platform. However, it cannot be denied that messages related to this crucial issue in the election years tend to be clouded by gimmicks and images from politicians who have greater control and capital over the TikTok algorithm. Therefore, emancipatory political strategies through TikTok and other social media must focus not only on the political message to be conveyed, but also on the medium for conveying that message. For the medium is the message.



CONCLUSION

This case study explains how TikTok as a social media has unique characteristics that influence the process of sending and receiving messages, especially in a political context. TikTok, with its large and growing number of users, has great potential for use in political campaigns. TikTok also has a strong content personalization system thanks to artificial intelligence, which makes it able to deliver content that closely matches user preferences. This uniqueness makes TikTok an attractive platform for politicians, especially those with a poor track record, as it can effectively polish their image through short, engaging videos.

Although TikTok is often used by politicians with gimmicky political strategies, the platform also has emancipatory potential. TikTok has been used by young people to express their political views on important issues such as climate change and employment. TikTok's characteristics, which match young people's lifestyles and content preferences, make it a fertile field for social movements and political discussions. Several cases, such as the cultural appropriation debate and the pro-Palestinian campaign, show that TikTok can be an effective medium for gathering support and spreading political messages.



However, TikTok's emancipatory potential is often overshadowed by the dominance of politicians who have greater control over algorithms and capital. Therefore, political strategies that want to use TikTok must pay attention not only to the message conveyed, but also to the medium used. As McLuhan explained, "the medium is the message," meaning that the characteristics of the medium itself can determine how the message is shaped, delivered, and received by the public. By understanding and exploiting the unique characteristics of TikTok, more effective and inclusive political campaigns can be realized.

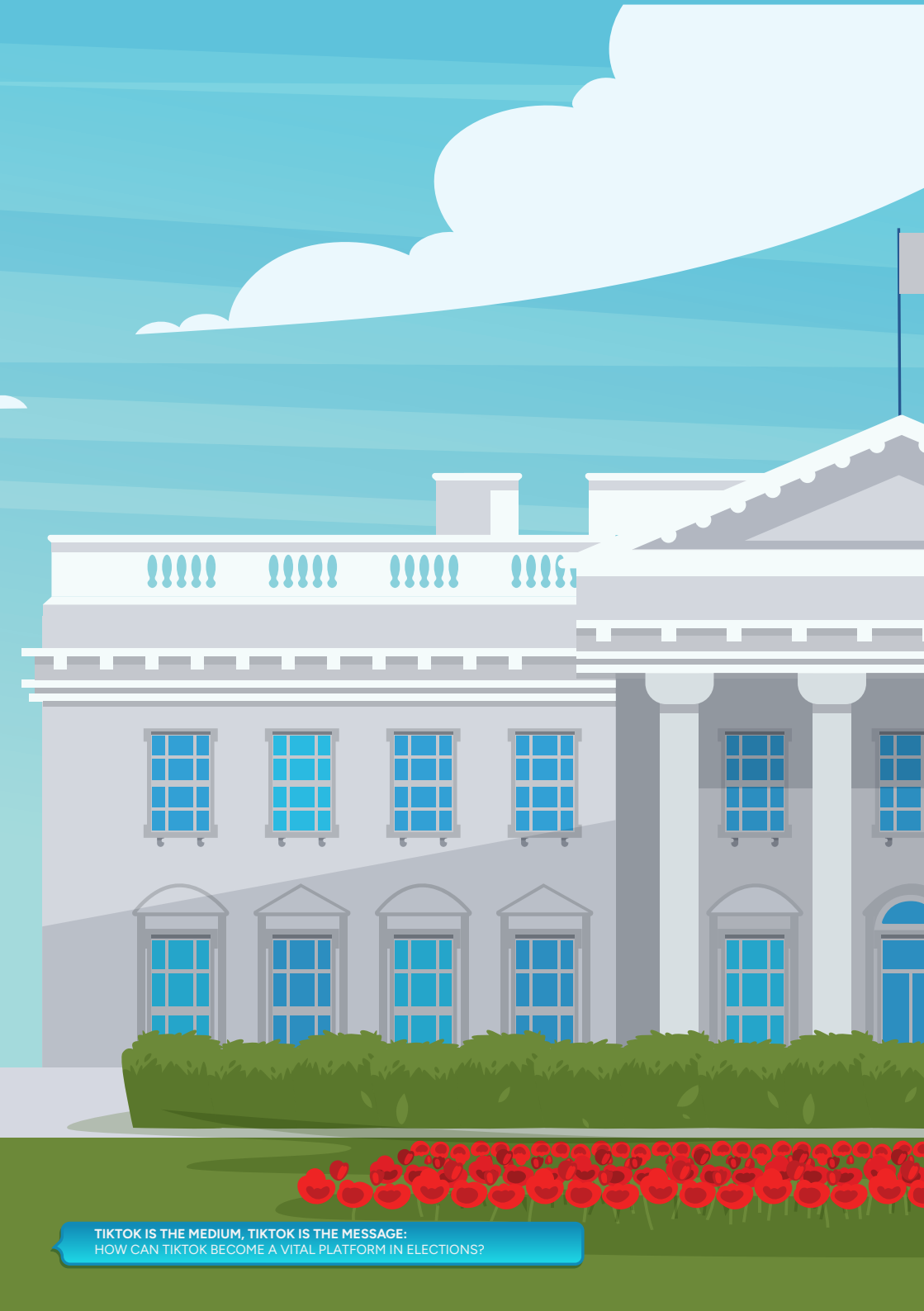
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