



# Hashtags and hoaxes: Misinformation on TikTok

## A media literacy resource for educators and libraries

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As NewsGuard and others have reported, TikTok is not all just fun and dancing. Misinformation on topics ranging from COVID-19 vaccines to the war in Ukraine is commonly found in videos on the platform, often displayed without any warnings. This series of exercises helps students look critically at the information available on TikTok and evaluate the credibility of TikTok videos using strategies including applying NewsGuard's criteria.

- Suggested time: 1 hour
  - Grade levels: 6-12
  - Outcomes: Understand the need to be critical of potentially false information on social media platforms like TikTok; Devise methods to verify the credibility of videos with the help of NewsGuard's criteria
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### Exercise 1: Misinformation gone viral

**Objective:** Understand how social media platforms spread misinformation and why this is particularly harmful during times of crisis.

**Suggested time:** 20 minutes

During times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there is a lot of information spread on the internet — some true, some false. Of all the social media platforms you use, which one do you think might spread the most misinformation?

- Share: Ask students to share the names of various social platforms they use.
- Discuss the social media platforms mentioned and how they might spread misinformation
- Look at these screenshots of two videos containing harmful and misleading messages about the COVID-19 vaccine. Which aspects of the videos might result in them going viral? (Note: The first video has more than 300,000 likes and the second one has 2.6 million). Based on this example, how do you think video platforms like TikTok might be more likely to facilitate the spread of misinformation?

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- Why is it especially important to understand the difference between true and false information during a crisis? (Hint: Think about the ramifications of health hoaxes during COVID-19)

While Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are known to be common sources of false news, TikTok has recently become a major source of online misinformation. The social media platform has allowed videos containing misinformation to get thousands of views and go largely unchecked.

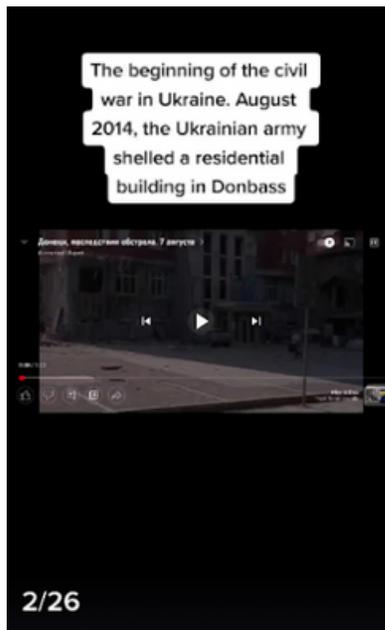
Consider this situation: You have just signed up for TikTok for the first time. How long do you think it might take before you get a video on your FYP (For You Page) – or main feed – that contains misinformation about the Russia-Ukraine war?

In the months leading up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there was a rise in disinformation about Ukraine and its allies, intended to spread propaganda against Ukraine before the invasion. Such falsehoods found their way into different social media platforms as well. According to the results of an investigation conducted by NewsGuard, new users on TikTok were exposed to misinformation about the war within just 40 minutes of signing up (to read more about the investigation, click on this link-

<https://www.newsguardtech.com/misinformation-monitor/march-2022/>).

Examples of misinformation about the Russia-Ukraine war found by NewsGuard include the following videos:

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The first screenshot is of a video claiming to show the “beginning of the civil war in Ukraine in August 2014,” accusing Ukrainian forces of shelling a residential building in Donbas. However, the conflict in the region was led by Russian-backed forces that began taking over government buildings in Russian-speaking regions like Donbas in 2014. While Ukrainian government forces retaliated against the Russian-supported forces, the region’s conflict was not started by the Ukrainian army in 2014, as the screenshot misleadingly claims. While both sides have been involved in carrying out shelling during the conflict, many international reports have found no evidence of a deliberate attack against civilians by Ukraine in Donbas.

The second screenshot implies that Ukraine is a fascist state. This is a common myth spread by various Russian propaganda networks, claiming that fascist Nazi ideology is prevalent in Ukraine’s politics and society. While groups that have cited fascist ideology exist in Ukraine, they do not have a sizeable presence in Ukraine’s politics. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, the far-right nationalist party Svoboda won only 2.2 percent of the vote.

**Discuss as a class: Why do you think misinformation can spread so easily on TikTok?**

Here are some reasons why misinformation spreads on TikTok:

1. There is a lack of effective content labelling and moderation, meaning that a video full of false information can often be viewed by thousands of users without any label or warning about its misleading content. TikTok uses both AI technology and human moderators to remove videos that have inappropriate content, including misinformation. However, AI is not nuanced enough to assess most false claims, and finds it even harder to analyse video content than text. Moreover, it is difficult for content moderators to manually check the thousands of videos uploaded daily.
2. The lack of labelling is even more problematic on a platform like TikTok, because the short videos and captions don't give much space for background context. For example, in a news article, if there is an unclear headline, the article itself may be able to clarify it. On TikTok, if a video has some confusing and potentially false information, there aren't many ways to explain the video or give context, particularly in a short amount of time and with many distracting effects like music or video distortions.
3. TikTok promotes content that keeps users on the app for longer, including sensational or exaggerated claims in videos. These are common features of videos that spread misinformation.

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## **Exercise 2: Be your own NewsGuard – TikTok edition**

**Objectives:** Think critically about TikTok videos and about NewsGuard's criteria for rating the reliability of information.

Suggested time: 30 minutes

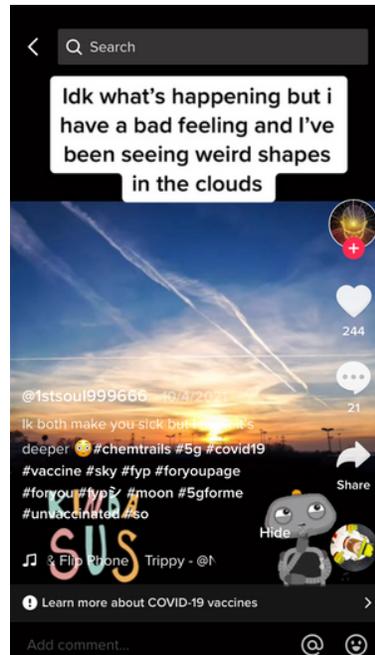
As you may know, NewsGuard's teams of trained journalists rate news and information websites. Our journalistic criteria for rating the reliability of these sites are based on characteristics of news sites, such as the accuracy of their headlines and their practices for differentiating between opinions and news content.

Look through NewsGuard's nine criteria for reliability. Then, split into groups and:

1. Discuss which NewsGuard criteria could be used to judge the credibility and transparency of TikTok accounts and the videos they post, and which criteria would not be as relevant
2. Come up with 2-3 new criteria that would be particularly useful to judge the credibility and transparency of TikTok videos and accounts

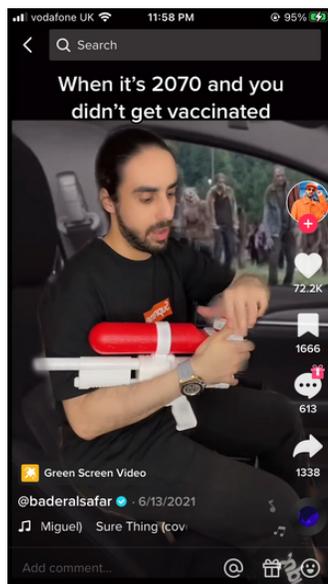
Here are some TikToks containing misinformation. Are you able to use any of your new criteria to spot the false claims?

1



Video- [https://drive.google.com/file/d/15djDn9N5vPChBGUR5xG\\_a4aB26xN8bKw/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/15djDn9N5vPChBGUR5xG_a4aB26xN8bKw/view?usp=sharing)

2



Video- <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMLEqckvH/?k=1>

3



Video- <https://drive.google.com/file/d/13aLEtiSk45R9o4h8O6MliLuEWaDvmzml/view?usp=sharing>

Let's review some of the false claims in these TikToks and how NewsGuard's criteria — or the criteria you came up with for TikTok — could help spot them!

### Video 1:

False claim: 5G cellular technology and the radiation caused by it poses health and safety risks.

Fact: There is no credible evidence that 5G presents significant health risks or that it is any more harmful than other common technologies that rely on electromagnetic radiation, such as 4G, Wi-Fi networks, and body-scanners used in security checks. There is also no evidence linking 5G to the COVID-19 pandemic or any environmental changes.

### Video 2:

False claim: People who receive the COVID-19 vaccine will turn into zombies in the future (or have some other life-changing disease).

Fact: While messenger ribonucleic acid (mRNA) vaccines — the vaccine technology used in most COVID-19 vaccines — are a new technology, it is not possible for these vaccines to alter your DNA. The protein produced by the vaccine to fight the virus is harmless and does not cause any neurological (brain) damage.

### **Video 3:**

False claim: “The [COVID-19] vaccines have never stopped transmissions... We have evidence from across the world that the more countries have vaccinated, they have prolonged the pandemic, they’ve increased the number of cases, and they’ve increased mortality. So, the worldwide vaccine program has backfired... [the vaccines] provide no credible coverage against Omicron”

Fact: Vaccines reduce the chances of new variants of COVID-19 spreading with the same speed and intensity. Professor Luke O’Neill, an immunologist at Trinity College Dublin, told Euronews in April 2021 that, “Vaccines bring out the human immune system to kill the virus, that stops it replicating and therefore the chance of variants emerging is decreased.” Vaccinated individuals are less likely to fall sick from COVID-19.

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### **Exercise 3: Put a (Nutrition) Label on it**

**Objectives:** Analyse the usefulness of warning labels or more detailed nutrition labels for misinformation on social media.

Suggested time: 10 minutes

Here are screenshots of some videos NewsGuard found containing false information on TikTok. Pretend you’re on TikTok’s content moderation team and you want to warn users about these videos. However, you can’t delete or remove the videos entirely, because the board has decided to let users make their own informed decisions based on the warnings TikTok provides.

- What warnings, labels, or other actions would you take to inform users about false content in videos? Get as creative as you can!
- How would you differentiate generally reliable accounts from generally unreliable accounts?

1



A video on TikTok falsely claiming that rapper Biggie Smalls had predicted the COVID-19 pandemic in his song from 2012

Video- <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MdkAv94ZoHLjKJfN1ODweAGjEoDTG-8N/view?usp=sharing>

Why this claim is false

- The video has been edited over, these lyrics are not the original lyrics from the song "It Was All A Dream"
- Coronavirus is part of a larger family of viruses and has been referred to in the past by many public figures outside of the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

2



A video claiming to have spotted a UFO in New Jersey that went viral in September 2021 (and is still up online!).

Video- <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1C2Pq2q37HITMWfsFSh8Jl9FrTJMujRLU/view?usp=sharing>

Why this claim is false

- The 'UFO' was actually a Goodyear blimp flying over New Jersey
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### **Let's summarise what we've learned from this exercise:**

- TikTok, like other social media platforms, gives a platform to many potential sources of misinformation. The nature of the video-based app, which uses captivating videos to grab the attention of users, makes it even more conducive for the spread of videos containing shocking misinformation.
- During times of conflict and crisis, there is a lot of information around on the internet. It is important in such situations to be aware of false information that could result in increasing panic or harm and prevent people from making informed decisions for their health and safety.
- Alongside useful NewsGuard criteria like looking at the sources of information or the use of accurate headings, there are some other helpful ways of analyzing the credibility of TikTok videos and social media posts. These could include looking at the relevance of hashtags used, the content of captions, whether or not the images/videos are edited, and the past activity of the account posting the video.
- While it is important to inform users about potential misinformation on social media, it is unhelpful to simply remove or block all problematic information. This is why social media platforms should improve how they label dubious posts and warn their users about the same to allow users to make an informed decision about the content they consume.