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English 307

13 October 2023

### **TikTok: The Merging of Social Media and Search Engine**

Launched in 2018, TikTok has quickly become one of the most widely used social media platforms, particularly with the younger generations. At its core, TikTok is a strong enabler and facilitator of “doomscrolling”, or aimless scrolling through internet content on a given social media platform with trouble stopping. This phenomenon has become increasingly important in TikTok’s algorithm; because when users are continuously exposed to content they like, they spend more time scrolling on the app, searching for more content to satisfy their curiosities and interests. While this algorithm of entertainment is still true in the way TikTok presents content to its users, the app has also evolved into a search engine and has begun to replace Google as a search engine. Users get their answers faster in the form of video explanations while never having to detach themselves from the medium. While looking at TikTok in the context of remediation, we see Google being highlighted, refashioned, and absorbed into the new interface of the medium. This paper analyzes this medium, TikTok, explaining its remediation, change as an extension of the self, and influence in participatory culture.

The most widely used social media platforms among young people are Instagram, Snapchat, and Tiktok. What these three platforms have in common is the integration of videos as a source of entertainment. Everyone has their own preferred learning style, whether that may be in a visual, auditory, verbal, or physical way. However, the amount of interest and attention that young people give to content that is in video form suggests that watching videos is now the preferred way to obtain information quickly. An article from the New York Times highlights the story of 15 year old student JaKobi Moore who was looking for information on how to go about

getting a letter of recommendation from a teacher. (Huang, 2022). Instead of going to Google, she went to TikTok and found videos of actual teachers explaining the process. Additionally, an article from Wired presents a study from Google concluding that “nearly 40 percent of people age 18 to 24 would look to Instagram or TikTok, not Google Search or Maps” for answers to their questions and solutions to their problems (Johnson, 2022). The article also discusses Google’s latest feature in development called “Exploration” that displays “search results in a continuous scroll of tiles... that more closely resembles a social media feed” and caters to the vicious cycle of “doomscrolling” (Johnson, 2022). Though this technology aims to mimic TikTok’s interface, the feature is said to be designed for creativity and inspiration; however, the people that are using TikTok or Instagram as a search engine are in search of real answers to real questions that are often outside of a creative realm. According to a 24 year old communications and social media coordinator, she often seeks a “different opinion from what the ads and websites optimized for Google say” (Huang, 2022). While this divide between TikTok and Google may not have been consciously intended in the app’s development, TikTok providing its users with a search bar was the beginning of the medium’s journey into participatory culture, remediation, and an extension of the user’s self.

One feature of TikTok that makes it stand out to its users is the ability to interact with other users or “creators”. Connecting back to 15 year old student JaKari Moore, she argues that the TikTok videos that answered her questions “were easier to understand than a Google search result or Youtube video” (Huang, 2022). While Youtube still provides users with the preferred video format opposed to textual format, most TikTok videos range from 15-30 seconds, while Youtube videos can go on for hours. Furthermore, the use of shorter videos in social media is nothing new to its frequent users. With a digital medium, remediation can try to “refashion the older medium or media entirely, while still marking the presence of the older media” (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). Remediation transformed the incredibly popular video app Vine, which is no longer in service, into TikTok. The 7-second video limit of Vine kept the user’s attention and the

app itself was highly enjoyed by the public. Users were able to “revine”, or repost, videos that they enjoyed; and eventually, the app would show the user more videos that catered to their taste. The app’s success and widespread acclaim reflects how the medium can be personalized and equipped to each user. We see this with TikTok in its short videos and algorithm based on what the user watches and searches for. With both the old medium (Vine) and the “new” medium (TikTok), speed is essential. The medium only does what we tell it to do; or in this case, the video ends whenever we decide to scroll. However, we get more satisfaction when we are able to watch the whole video and get all the information we need, and this is the biggest reason why TikTok is being used as a search engine. When considering the extensions of the self, our technologies help us in “the interest of efficiency and practicality”, intertwined with knowledge (McLuhan, 1994). TikTok as a technology, or medium, decreases the time we would spend otherwise looking through endless articles and websites on a Google search. Further, TikTok extends communication beyond just watching or making videos by allowing users to message other users, comment on videos, and ask questions to creators through the Q&A feature. The ease of use that comes with using TikTok as a search engine proves itself as the strongest message of this “new” medium. When discussing the concept of the medium as a whole, it is vital to consider McLuhan’s statement that “the content of any medium is always another medium” (McLuhan, 1994). Google does in fact have endless extensions, whether that be through communication, work, or just web-surfing; however, TikTok provides this and more. It is easy to find websites of organizations’ job offers, but TikTok in itself can be a job. One of the most popular searches on TikTok is for ASMR videos, and when people search and find an ASMR creator that they like, they have the option to donate to them or subscribe to them. These creators also do livestreams on the TikTok app where viewers are able to send them monetary gifts, and the most popular creators are able to make a living off of these features. Without TikTok’s personalized algorithm, users’ searches would have little to no value other than momentary entertainment. Google’s search engine remembers your search history; but other

than telling you what websites you've already visited, it doesn't much enhance the medium or the message of the medium. McLuhan defines the message of any medium as "the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces to human affairs" (McLuhan, 1994). When considering TikTok in comparison to Google, all three elements are changed or enhanced. This can be attributed to the evolution of technology, but mainly the participatory nature of this medium itself. TikTok's slogan on their website sums up participatory culture perfectly: "Join the millions of viewers discovering content and creators on TikTok". Moreover, this has immense social and cultural impacts on both users and technology. For the users of the medium, it makes them feel as if they are a part of a community of people who like the same things or are searching for the same things as they are. Including the phrase "join the millions of viewers" in their slogan allows TikTok to persuade their target audience that they will be taking part in something that will satisfy their curiosity and boredom. As for the impacts on technology, TikTok has raised the bar for all other social media platforms and now, search engines. The change in pace, scale, and pattern has transformed what we expect from a medium and has rendered anything that slows down the process of searching or discovering obsolete. With TikTok now being heavily search-based, the user leads the technology and enhances the medium, hence why the user-based search history algorithm has been so successful for TikTok.

It is clear that the young users of TikTok may not have intended for TikTok to be a competitor to Google in the realm of search engines, but the interactivity and automaticity of the changes in this medium are compelling to users (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). Young people have gotten bored of Google's interface and its hypermediacy has become its greatest weakness. There now exists an intolerance for the recognition of the medium and the consultation of more than one medium to complete a task, or in this case, find an answer to a question. Furthermore, this does not negate the argument that the content of a medium is another medium. TikTok is no longer just an entertainment app, but also a search engine, a messaging app, a camera, and a live streaming service. TikTok calls its users to participate in all of the mediums within its

medium; and in effect, has sparked the absorption of all other social media and search engines into one.

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