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ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL: NEWS INFLUENCERS AND AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT IN LOCAL AND STATE POLITICS DISCOURSE DYNAMICS ON TIKTOK

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In the age of the “video-first internet” (Broderick, 2023), TikTok has rapidly established itself as a fixture for debate on the state of the web and society at large. The platform serves as a primary generator of trends and viral content, and as a locus for political concerns around globalisation, surveillance and privacy. Moves to ban TikTok conquered headlines in the United States through 2023, and in Australia, the app was prohibited on government devices in April (McGuirk, 2023). Despite this, political dialogue and journalistic engagement on TikTok persisted. According to the Digital News Report 2023, the use of TikTok for news continues to rise amongst younger Australians. Yet, the attention to detailed political discourse on these platforms in academic research is still emerging (e.g. Literat, 2021). Across the political and academic spheres, the focus has mainly been on perceived threats of the platform itself, such as international influence either from the platform’s Chinese business origins or the rapid importation, adoption, and cycling of international cultural trends. What is considerably understudied is how TikTok is forging connections in political discourses more locally.

Grasping the usage and impact of TikTok across demographics is a complex challenge. While TikTok may not have the market capture of behemoths like Facebook, it is a rising generator and driver of discourses online. TikTok is not currently the top provider of news content for any demographic, at least in Australia (Park et al, 2023), but this use is growing, alongside instinctual use as a search engine for Gen Z for everything from recipes to current events (Huang, 2022). In 2024, data from the Pew Research Centre revealed that almost 40% of US TikTok users were now in their 30s and 40s, rather than Gen Z, and that a majority of content was uploaded by a minority of users (Bestvater, 2024). Parallels with Twitter pre-X present themselves – not the most widely

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used platform, but the one that draws all the attention, driven by superusers. Indeed, meme documentation website KnowYourMeme.com reported that TikTok took over Twitter as primary origin source for memes in the first few months of 2022 (Walker, 2022).

Growing generational differences in behaviour on the app, as well as its unique affordances, means political discourse on TikTok may operate differently to elsewhere. As Susan Grantham (2023) has shown, local politicians can attain success—in form of responses and reactions—on the platform by playing to and with these affordances and adhering to TikTok aesthetics and styles. However, we do not yet know if and how wider political debate from other actors, including influencers, news, grassroots organisers etc., play out on TikTok, nor the relative reach and engagement with content posted by these actors. An interdisciplinary, mixed-methods approach for studying the role of video in political discourse is especially needed in order to grasp the range of uses of the platform and its content affordances, such as voiceovers, music, editing, and filters (Svegaard, 2022), as well as infrastructure affordances, such as stitches, topics, and music-as-search—and the work involved in these layers of political engagement (Abidin, 2016).

In this paper, we present an exploration of political discourses on TikTok through the case study of local city council elections for Brisbane in the state of Queensland, Australia, and for the later state elections in Queensland. Regular collections of videos were conducted in the four weeks before and after the elections on respectively 13 March 2024 (city) and 26 October 2024 (state). The videos were drawn from a growing, snowballed list of key topic search terms originating from local media coverage and previous collections. Video metadata was recorded using the Zeeschuimer (Peeters, 2023) tool.

The timing and structure of the local and state elections in Brisbane and Queensland offer a fortunate opportunity to study the different discourses which may arise at different levels of politics amongst similar communities. Australia's premier elections analyst predicted in January that the timing of the Queensland state election in late 2024 and upcoming federal Australian election in early 2025 would have the Brisbane council elections "dissected for their state and federal implications" (Green, 2024, para 3) with greater attention than usual. The Brisbane City Council is also unique as Australia's largest local authority, with comparable responsibility to small states and territories in terms of responsibility for public infrastructure and services (Green, 2024). Furthermore, Queensland has long been a fixation of national political discourses, with a complicated history melding economic socialism and social conservatism (Head, 1986). The most recent federal election in 2022 sparked interest in a new shift in Queensland politics: The conservative Liberal-National Party coalition has controlled the Council for over 16 years, while the opposing Labor Party has controlled the Queensland state government for nearly 10; as of 2022, inner-city Brisbane has three Greens Party federal electorates—more than any other city (Riga, 2023). With increasing investment and interest in the Queensland Greens, both the discourses and visible actors of Queensland electoral campaigns are in a new state of flux.

In our study, we focus on the discursive dynamics of the broader local community both separately and in response to the communication of candidates. We draw on research on the social news landscape and the role of ‘newsfluencers’ and community narratives amidst changing audience expectations (Hurcombe, 2022), and clustering of cross-ideological ties in social media news sharing over time (Angus et al, 2023). Through this, we contrast the topic-selective engagement across various actors, from mainstream and national news outlets, local or alternative media, businesses, organisations, political campaigners, and unaffiliated individual users. As such, we focus on how local TikTok users respond to, remix, engage with, and disseminate political communication on TikTok, as well as how they create their own political content, such as advocating for/against a candidate, an issue, or engaging in commentary on the wider election process.

We take a mixed-methods approach to our analysis. Collecting through Zeeschuimer provides a set of metadata points, which can be used to assess reach, engagement, and responses relating to videos, themes, or other trends, while the method of collection – a scroll-along – gives us a visual overview of the video uploads. In doing so, we are working with TikTok’s algorithm, allowing it to aid us in curating a feed that focuses on local and state politics to ensure maximum exposure for us to the relevant content. In addition to collecting larger amounts of metadata, we will take random samples of our feed and do a closer reading of emerging video (downloaded using JDownloader2) and text content in terms of discourse and use of TikTok affordances.

Through this, we explore the political debate landscape on TikTok in the example of local and state elections in Brisbane and Queensland, which serve as a discreet time period as well as a wider theme through which to understand political discourse on TikTok. Elections are traditionally times of heightened political interest and debate, where everything from the hyper-local to the global may become points of contention and debate. By using the elections rather than a random time period, we hope to get a better understanding of TikTok’s use as a tool in political debate as we can expect higher than usual engagement.

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