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"The algorithm loves the war": ambivalent visibility in content creator practices during war

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ABSTRACT

Content creators in war zones are critical in shaping global perceptions of conflict. Through social media, they document real-time events and reach audiences beyond the traditional news frameworks. Based on an ethnographic study of Czech and Ukrainian TikTok creators sharing war-related content from Ukraine, we introduce the concept of ambivalent visibility – a condition shaped by the conflicting demands creators face in balancing algorithmic amplification, audience engagement and ethical responsibility. In conflict zones, ambivalent visibility emerges as creators integrate war-related content into platform vernaculars, such as native templates and viral formats, while negotiating the risks of trivialization and misinterpretation. We identify three forms of ambivalence: (1) tension between raw immediacy and platform-friendly visibility, where creators balance the urgency of documenting war with the need to remain legible to the algorithm; (2) blurred boundaries between digital storytelling and journalism, as creators navigate dual roles as informal correspondents and narrative influencers; and (3) a virality paradox, in which tragedy becomes a driver of engagement, propelling content not despite its emotional gravity, but because of it. We conclude by positioning these creators as contemporary war communicators, bridging journalism and personal stories to reframe how conflicts are witnessed and understood in the platform age.

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Introduction

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the conflict was swiftly dubbed 'the first TikTok war' (Bösch and Divon 2024; Stokel-Walker 2022), reflecting the platform's rapid emergence as a central space for war-related content. TikTok became a key hub for both amateur and professional audiovisual materials (Marino 2024), shaping diverse narratives about the war. Its influence was further amplified by high-profile figures – from content creators and journalists to politicians like Ukrainian president

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Volodymyr Zelensky – who turned to TikTok to engage with global audiences and deliver political messages (Serafin 2022).

What sets TikTok apart in crisis coverage is the platform's algorithmic affordances and participatory culture (Sarwatay, Lee, and Bondy Valdovinos Kaye 2023), which enable real-time engagement with unfolding global events. The platform's ability to rapidly circulate content has created new forms of visibility for influencers and everyday users alike as they navigate algorithm-driven platform economies shaped by personalization and monetization structures (Yesiloglu and Costello 2020). Within this ecosystem, content creators – sometimes labelled influencers[1]—have emerged as digital opinion leaders (Arnesson and Reinkainen 2024), playing a crucial role in shaping the public perception of the war.

Ukrainian creators, the subject of our study, became key sources of real-time updates, documenting daily life amidst the invasion or their displacement journeys across Europe. They leveraged TikTok's sociotechnical affordances – including algorithmic amplification, audiovisual memes and visual storytelling templates (Badola 2024; Bösch and Divon 2024) – to transform their personal experiences into viral content. These features allowed ordinary users to amass tens of thousands of followers overnight, positioning them not just as witnesses but as active participants in shaping the war's digital narratives (Divon and Eriksson Krutrök 2023).

As Ukrainians turned to TikTok for real-time war documentation and storytelling, their content began to influence creators beyond Ukraine's borders. In the Czech Republic – a Central and Eastern European country affected by the arrival of Ukrainian refugees – local creators engaged with the war by summarizing news reports, amplifying Ukrainian voices and situating updates within regional discourse. This cross-border engagement fostered a networked ecosystem of war-related audiovisual content, where creators collaborated to shape digital narratives of the conflict. In turn, this evolving media landscape highlights TikTok's deep entanglement with digital economies, platform governance and geopolitical tensions – particularly in light of its parent company, ByteDance, and its contested role in the global data economy (Kaye et al. 2022).

These dynamics also foreground the precarious realities of content creation during wartime, linking the lived experiences of emerging creators to broader structural inequalities within media production industries (Kotišová 2023). While such inequalities have often been examined through the lens of war-zone narratives (Divon and Eriksson Krutrök 2024), this study shifts the focus to the creators behind the content. Drawing from ongoing ethnographic fieldwork, including participant and non-participant observation, as well as interviews with creators from the region, we explore the lived experiences of two key creators, one Ukrainian and one Czech, and how they navigate TikTok's algorithmic landscape, engage with audiences and position themselves within a media ecosystem shaped by war. Specifically, we ask (a) how creators incorporate war-related information, considering their context and origin; (b) how they perceive, engage with and respond to TikTok's algorithm; and (c) how imagined audience reactions shape the content they produce.

Based on these interviews, we propose a condition among creators of *ambivalent visibility*—a contradictory experience navigating TikTok's affordances in wartime where algorithmic amplification, audience engagement and ethical constraints pull creators in opposing directions. This ambivalence takes three forms: (1) a tension between raw immediacy and platform-friendly visibility, (2) blurred boundaries between digital

storytelling and journalism and (3) a virality paradox, where tragedy becomes a driver of engagement.

While TikTok allows these creators to reach global audiences, it simultaneously exposes them to risks of trivialization, misinterpretation and backlash – pushing them to carefully navigate their presence within the platform's affordances and governance structures. In doing so, our findings contribute to urgent and evolving conversations around platform vernaculars, visibility and the shifting role of creators in the production of war-related content.

Content creators and political communication on TikTok

TikTok has rapidly become a dominant platform for content creation, fuelled in part by the decline of other platforms that have limited organic audience reach through shifts in their algorithmic infrastructure (Duffy et al. 2021). Its rise is also attributed to its distinct platform architecture, prioritizing short-form video, unpredictable virality, audiovisual memes and highly customizable content templates (Zeng, Abidin, and Schäfer 2021). While existing scholarship on TikTok largely focuses on user behaviour, visibility cultures and technological affordances, research continues to evolve, reflecting the platform's expanding role in digital participation within everyday life (Kaye, Zeng, and Patrick 2022).

Young adults are increasingly turning to TikTok for news consumption, with creators – both on and beyond the platform – emerging as key sources of information for this target group (Newman et al. 2024; Pew Research Center 2024). As a result, TikTok is not only transforming how news is consumed but also influencing the broader media landscape, with traditional outlets increasingly turning to the platform to reach new audiences (Newman 2022; Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and López-García 2022). Its 'serious turn' (Ebbrect-Hartmann and Divon 2022) gained momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic, positioning TikTok as a hybrid space for both entertainment and information – particularly among younger users (Kaye, Zeng, and Patrick 2022). This shift has led to growing attention to how influencers operate as alternative news sources, particularly as they move beyond their initial domains, such as lifestyle and gaming (Hund 2023), to engage with political discourse.

As TikTok's influence has grown, scrutiny over how influencers shape political debates has also intensified. Riedl and colleagues (2023, 2) define *political influencers* as 'content creators that endorse a political position, social cause, or candidate through media that they produce and/or share on a given social media platform'. This category includes both individuals who build their audience around political content and professional creators who occasionally leverage their influence to advocate for political causes. At the same time, many high-profile users – including politicians and journalists – adopt influencer strategies (Bishop 2023; Joosse and Zelinsky 2023), further blurring the boundaries between lifestyle and politics, which remain fluid, ambivalent and context-dependent.

This fluidity becomes even more pronounced in times of war and crisis, where content creators assume roles that go beyond traditional political commentary. The rise of on-the-ground reporting by creators in war zones complicates distinctions between the journalistic profession and the creator economy, as these individuals become key sources of real-time information. In such contexts, content creation aligns with citizen journalism (Allan and Thorsen 2009), where individuals document and disseminate information without

adhering to formal journalistic standards. As previously expressed by Divon and Eriksson Krutrök (2025), Ukrainian content creators during the ongoing war who 'report' from their sites of trauma can be understood as 'war influencers' – users who inhabit a distinctive space on social media located at the intersection of citizen journalism, voluntary witnessing, microcelebrity activism and online content creation.

This growing entanglement between content creation, journalism and political discourse is particularly evident in how social media platforms have reshaped activism, conflicts and crises in real time (Hutchinson 2021; Poell and van Dijck 2015). As influencers and activists leverage digital spaces to amplify political messages, social media introduces new communicative formats that facilitate faster, more decentralized and highly audiovisual forms of engagement. This shift reflects a broader transformation in political mobilization, moving from a collective action framework towards a connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), where digital networks – rather than formal organizations – drive engagement.

Nowhere has this shift been more visible than in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, where TikTok became a crucial space for on-the-ground updates (Badola 2024; Lokot 2023). In response, Ukrainian creators pivoted to English-language content, ensuring their narratives reached global audiences beyond their immediate communities (Heřmanová 2023). This aligns with a broader trend of increased protest audiovisualities, where short-form videos, viral sounds and remixable content shape activist expression (Cervi and Divon 2023; Schoon and Bosch 2024). Yet, while social media's role in networked activism and protest visibility is well-documented (Tufekci 2017), TikTok's specific impact on wartime activism – particularly how creators perceive their vernacular practices and role in shaping political engagement – remains underexplored and warrants further investigation.

Platform vernaculars, ambiguity and visibility

This platform-specific adaptation of wartime expression invites closer attention to what Gibbs et al. (2015, 257) have termed 'platform vernaculars', where content becomes inherently vernacular, which 'depend[s] in important ways on the social media platform being used'. Rather than solely dictated by user agency, content creation is shaped, developed and constrained by platform affordances. Each 'platform comes to have its own unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics, which can be considered as constituting a platform vernacular, or a popular (as in "of the people") genre of communication'. These communicative genres emerge via the interplay between platform affordances and the ways users appropriate and perform them in practice (ibid).

Thus, vernaculars highlight how TikTok's participatory affordances facilitate user engagement, connections and political mobilization. Unlike older platforms like Instagram or YouTube, TikTok's defining feature is its For You Page (or FYP), a recommendation system that dictates visibility dynamics. This system is examined via concepts such as the *algorithmic self* (Pasquale 2015) and *algorithmic gossip* (Bishop 2019), which influence how creators engage with their imagined audiences (Bhandari and Bimo 2022). TikTok's fast-virality mechanism allows content to gain widespread exposure – even for creators without an existing follower base – making the platform's reach highly unpredictable and difficult to navigate, particularly when trying to foster meaningful

connections in a space where community-building is perceived as fragmented rather than monolithic (Are, Talbot, and Briggs 2024).

At the same time, TikTok's infrastructure relies on templates, including aural and visual memes, which 'afford an accessible, expressible, and relatable framework within which ordinary users can create' (Cervi and Divon 2023, 3). These templates not only facilitate participation but also structure how activism and political discourse unfold on platforms (Highfield and Leaver 2016). Among these templates, the point-of-view (POV) format became particularly prominent in the context of the war in Ukraine, with users participating in trends such as 'POV: You live in Ukraine' or 'POV: You live in a bomb shelter'. During the war, the POV format evolved into 'a dialogic environment where the creator becomes the focal point of the viewer's POV, fostering a deeper empathic understanding of trauma by allowing viewers to connect with the creator's embodied experience' (Divon and Eriksson Krutrök 2024, 8; Trillò 2024).

Through the use of such templates, creators engage in what Abidin (2016, 90) defines as visibility labour: 'the work enacted to flexibly demonstrate gradients of self-conspicuousness in digital or physical spaces depending on intention or circumstance for favourable ends.' By strategically adapting war-related content to enhance algorithmic visibility, creators transform their work into new forms of self-branding. This labour is embedded in a paradoxical visibility vernacular of authenticity – both an aspirational ideal and a construct shaped by audience expectations (Cunningham and Craig 2017; Duffy et al. 2021). Rather than being a fixed quality, it is best understood as a communicative process – constantly negotiated between creators and audiences. This negotiation is considered inherently performative, as creators use 'calibrated amateurism' (Abidin 2016, 2022) to stay relatable, relying on *markers of authenticity* (Frowijn, Harbers, and Broersma 2022; Heřmanová 2022) like '#no_filter' and behind-the-scenes glimpses to project unmediated self-expression.

Yet, visibility labour alone is not sufficient to be *seen* in TikTok's dynamic media environment. To sustain connection, maximize reach and navigate algorithmic demands, creators blend strategic self-presentation with affective media practices – embedding personal storytelling into viral trends to cultivate resonance with viewers. These practices can disrupt traditional media narratives, allowing users to produce 'personalized, reflexive, embodied, socially situated knowledge' that can serve as a form of political resistance (Lokot 2023, 776). While the study of affective mobilization predates TikTok (Kummels and John 2019), the platform's unique infrastructure has amplified these practices, enabling new modes of virality via meme-based activism (Cervi and Divon 2023; Primig, Dorottya Szabó, and Lacasa 2023). Marino (2024, 8), for instance, illustrates how Ukrainian refugees use TikTok for 'performative refugeeness', where virality is strategically harnessed to sustain a 'digital care network', connecting different publics through emotional engagement. Together, these emerging practices point to the need for creator-centred approaches that examine how platform vernaculars and affective strategies are navigated in real time – an aim we take up in this study.

Methodology

Our research is based on a long-term digital ethnography with content creators from the Czech Republic and Ukraine, from spring 2022 to November 2024. For this

article, we focus on an in-depth case study of two creators: Johana, a 23-year-old based in Prague, Czech Republic, who runs the Instagram and TikTok account @jsemvobraze, and Valeria, a 22-year-old from Kyiv, Ukraine, posting under @valerisssh. This case study provides ethnographic insights into war-related content creation from two interconnected perspectives. As friends and occasional collaborators, Johana and Valeria repost each other's content and meet when possible, illustrating how Ukraine-related content spreads across Central and Eastern Europe as well as beyond the creator networks. Rather than focusing on national comparisons, we map the network of content and creators that emerged during the war, highlighting how local content in national languages becomes globalized and adapted for international audiences. Building on existing research, we explore content creation through the lens of platform vernaculars – emphasizing how TikTok's sociotechnical affordances intersect with the communicative habitus of its users (Gibbs et al. 2015).

This study is part of a broader research project that combines online and offline ethnography. Offline participant observation was primarily conducted in Prague, Czech Republic, focusing on a group of young content creators engaged in political content creation. This involved regular meetings, observing content production processes and documenting activities such as brainstorming, drafting scripts and filming audiovisual materials. Additionally, recorded interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into their creative and political engagement. Through these Czech-based creators, contact was established with Ukrainian content creators, who were then approached for online interviews. The online ethnography involved participant observation of creators' profiles and tracking their posted content, story updates, interactions with other users and engagement with political discourse. All participants were aware of the researchers' presence as they actively maintained visibility in the online field through comments, direct messages and ongoing engagement.

For this study, we selected a dataset consisting of field notes from both online and offline ethnographic work, focusing specifically on Johana (both online and offline) and Valeria (online). The dataset includes transcripts of online communications via platforms such as Telegram and Instagram, as well as interview transcripts. The recorded interviews were conducted by the study's first author. Johana's initial interview took place in person in Prague in April 2022, while Valeria's was conducted via Zoom in English in November 2023. Informed consent was obtained, and the data remained non-anonymized, as both creators requested to be named in all research project outputs.

The textual data (field notes and transcripts) were coded using an open coding approach (Rivas 2012). Following the grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1994), the initial round of coding focused on central themes and topics. During this phase, we uncovered a major tension between visibility, safety and the integrity of the political message, which will be explored further in our three forms of ambivalence among creators. The second phase of axial coding (ibid) focused on how these categories related to each other, the theoretical contexts and previous research in order to shape the analysis around key themes identified in the interviews. The analysis delves into the lived experiences of the content creators during the war, interpreting and contextualizing these realities through a range of data points. Grounded in Geertz's (1977 (2017) tradition of 'thick description', the empirical data are presented through contextualized

observations from our field notes. These ethnographic insights serve as the basis for the theoretical conceptualization of our findings.

Findings

'This is just shit. Fuck Putin': balancing immediacy and Visibility

The first form of ambivalence we identify centres on navigating the delicate tension between personal trauma and the imperative for visibility on TikTok. It was during an Instagram chat in November 2022 when Johana, a 23-year-old Czech content creator, abruptly stopped responding for half an hour. She later sent a voice message explaining what had happened:

> It's sirens, air raid warnings again. This is really fucking scary. I'm fine, I'm fine, don't worry about me. It's just. . . I don't know how I can post about this. This is just shit. Fuck Putin. I'm scared.

At the time, Johana was in Kyiv, accompanying a journalist and photographer from a renowned Czech weekly political magazine. They had invited her to join them in creating content and help deliver news about the situation in Ukraine to younger audiences. Johana is well-known in the Czech content creation space for her consistent political news updates on her Instagram account Jsem v obraze (translated as 'Stay in the picture').

Since 2021, she has also been growing her audience on TikTok. The magazine editors who invited her on the trip were particularly interested in her expertise in reaching audiences through short-form videos on TikTok, a platform where the magazine lacks a presence. In addition to her social media accounts, she launched a podcast series of the same name on Spotify, though she is not currently releasing new episodes.

Two weeks later, we met at a café in Prague to discuss her trip to Ukraine. She shared that the journalists gave her complete freedom over what to post on social media and helped her connect with 'local fixers' and other local media outlets. She admitted to feeling unprepared for the trip and noted that having support back in Prague would have been helpful so she did not have to '*spend 24/7 with a phone in my hand*'. Johana's main goal during the trip, however, was to connect with young people:

> I was, like, I want to do some content about people my age, like, how they live, how it impacts them. But, in the end, I don't know, it was bullshit. You know what, they are trying to live normally, they do parties and stuff, but they just have to deal with the fucking sirens and blackouts and everything.

Rather than focusing on herself and her experiences, Johana aimed to *'share the stories of the people'* or '*just what you see around you. There's no strategy. You just want to tell everyone that this is happening*.' For her, content creation is not a systematic process but one deeply influenced by the circumstantial and wartime contexts in which she and her peers navigate lives that oscillate between extremes and the mundane – a party and a bomb shelter – a dynamic that is deeply embedded in her lived experience and, inevitably, one that finds its way into her content.

When meeting Valeria, a 22-year-old Ukrainian content creator based in Kyiv, she shared a similar approach:

> The content strategy is made by Russia <shrugging>. No, really, there is no big, planned strategy. What is happening to me here, I will just post about that. I don't think about what I post.

At the start of the war, Valeria's content largely consisted of vlogs and recordings of her immediate surroundings. Before the invasion, she was active on both Instagram and TikTok, but her TikTok account saw significant growth during the war. Valeria was in Kyiv when the full-scale invasion began, then fled Ukraine, spending time in Italy with a friend's family before settling briefly in London. Throughout her journey, she '*posted through it*', she says with a self-aware laugh, acknowledging the irony of turning to social media as a coping mechanism amid loss, grief, societal upheaval and personal hardship, as explored in previous studies (Eriksson Krutrök 2021, 2025).

Now, back in Kyiv, her content has shifted from everyday vlogs to a more informative and educational tone. Valeria focuses on explaining the ongoing situation in Ukraine, shifting her content from personal testimony to strategically crafted messages aimed at raising international awareness. Her evolving role reflects the notion of 'political influencers' (Riedl, Lukito, and Woolley 2023), where imagined audiences play a key role in shaping content. What began as '*posting through it*' has developed into a more deliberate and informational practice, tailored to a growing audience that now includes global viewers, media outlets and journalists. This expanded visibility brings increased pressure for accuracy and fact-checking – a challenge explored further in the following section.

By centring immediacy in their content – via '*simply posting what is happening around me*' – Johana and Valeria underscore authenticity as a key strategy in their war documentation. They navigate the tension between the performative nature of their content (Duffy et al. 2021) and their perception of 'raw' footage as a more truthful representation of war's realities. Here, authenticity is a marker of immediacy (Frowijn, Harbers, and Broersma 2022) – the notion of '*being there*' as events unfold. However, the imperative to capture war's gravity and human suffering often conflicts with TikTok's algorithmic infrastructure, which favours trending content formats, creating an ongoing tension between visibility, engagement and ethical storytelling.

Johana and Valeria first met as content creators invited to an influencer trip to the European Parliament in late 2022, and they now amplify each other's content in various ways. From Prague, Johana regularly engages with Ukraine-related content, posting short overviews of major developments on her TikTok and Instagram accounts and frequently sharing Valeria's posts. When asked about their strategy for Ukraine-related content, both emphasize the urgency of '*just getting the content out there so people see what is happening*'. This immediacy, shaped by their audiences, underscores the dual role of both the creators and the platform as amplifiers of the ongoing war and their shared sense of responsibility. Valeria, reflecting on how the war transformed her platform, explained:

> I had followers before the war. I was a photographer, and I had, like, 3k on Instagram and, TikTok, maybe 300k. But then I posted that first video from the shelter, and it, like, skyrocketed on TikTok. So, I wanted to build on that, but also, you feel like . . . now you have the platform, now people can see it, so you have to let them know. It's your responsibility when you have the platform.

Similarly, Johana described her motivation:

> My whole brand is just, like, I post about politics because I am interested in politics and I want to show people that news can be, like, engaging and fun. But with this trip to Ukraine, it was also [. . .] this is my chance to do something bigger and, like, I am here, my followers are not here, so, like, I can reach this audience, I can maybe make them care about Ukrainians.

Both creators expressed that staying silent would feel wrong. They strive to balance the authenticity of '*being there*' – posting immediate, raw and unfiltered content – with the responsibility to their audiences, which includes being a source of truth, verifying accuracy and contextualizing events within a broader geopolitical framework.

'Am I a Journalist or just an activist?': negotiating roles and responsibilities

The second form of ambivalence involves negotiating the intersection of activist intentions and external labels. Discussing the commercial aspects of their work and whether it is possible to make money from it, Valeria and Johana reflected on the labels assigned to them by the media – and, as Johana jokes, by researchers like us. We talked about terms such as 'activist', 'journalist' and 'content creator'. Valeria shared her perspective:

> I'm just talking and spreading information about Ukraine in my style, in my way. Yes, it's like a content creator, but I prefer it when someone calls me a Ukrainian activist. Later, she also referred to herself as a journalist, saying, Yeah, I am kind of an independent journalist. Even if . . . , like, almost, even if I don't want to, but maybe I am.

While war influencers produce content to 'get attention and build social capital' (Gomez 2019, 15), they are 'politically motivated to attract public notice to their sites of trauma, injustice, or struggles by leveraging the powerful mechanism of exposure and dissemination of platforms' (Divon and Eriksson Krutrök 2025, 6). They do so with the intention of reporting, commentating on and amplifying audience knowledge and attention to war zones.

In our conversations, Johana was clear about distinguishing her role:

> I'm not a journalist in the sense that I was trained as a journalist. Like, this is important to say. I post about what I find important or interesting, I don't pretend to be objective or anything. I just do this because I am interested in this. But I do have an audience, and I deliver news to them, so maybe that makes me a journalist.

She also acknowledged her ability to reach wider audiences than traditional media:

> I know I can reach an audience that they can't reach. On TikTok, I can say this in a TikTok video in, like, 30 seconds, something they wouldn't be able to say in, like, I don't know how many words.

At the same time, Johana emphasized her deep respect for journalists and their work. After her trip, where she got to engage with journalists, she considered creating a TikTok account as a collaborative space where political content creators and young journalists could post, describing it as '*a newsroom, or, like, a project, to do news in this way*'. Valeria shared a similar perspective:

> Journalists are people who work in the big media companies. Like, they can talk to important people, do interviews . . . I don't. I am just a person who creates something for social media.

She acknowledged that her content does not meet the level of professionalism or seriousness associated with mainstream journalism. Both Johana and Valeria stressed their role as content creators rather than traditional media outlets while feeling a strong responsibility to share accurate information about the war, particularly with international audiences. Valeria reflected this as follows:

> I remember that at the beginning of the war, I was scared to post something that would be wrong or that someone might misunderstand me. Like, I felt a responsibility because my country is in a very difficult situation. And then there was an English-speaking community, people from different countries followed me, and I don't want to misinform them.

The role of content creators in news media production has gained significant attention, particularly in relation to TikTok's impact on disseminating information about the conflict in Ukraine and, more recently, the war in Gaza. While *citizen journalism* (Allan and Thorsen 2009) or *interloper media* (Eldridge Ii 2017) predate TikTok, the platform's rise has intensified focus on creators like Valeria, who provide on-the-ground reporting once exclusive to professional journalists. Lacking formal training, editorial support or fact-checking, these creators operate independently, fostering ambivalence about their role in the media ecosystem – an uncertainty they often acknowledge.

'The algorithm loves the war': exploiting virality for activism

The third form of ambivalence revolves around leveraging algorithmic visibility while grappling with the moral implications of viral content during a time of war. Becoming visible online requires labour (Abidin 2016; Stegeman, Are, and Poell 2024); creators strategically adjust their self-presentation within platform structures like algorithmic curation to enhance engagement. However, this process remains inherently unpredictable on TikTok as visibility is shaped not only by the intent of creators but also by the shifting logics of platform governance and audience dynamics. Reflecting on the steep learning curve in creating content for new audiences, Valeria explained:

> I just failed to, like, learn how I need to edit videos that will be viral. And then the one post did. So I was like, this is what I need to do for the video to go viral, like for the algorithm to catch, and for stuff like that to be popular.

When asked whether her first viral videos were a result of an intentional strategy or happenstance, she paused before responding:

> I guess, yeah. You want it to go viral, of course. It was the main point. It was the goal. It was my goal to, to like, I don't [know] how to say it, to catch . . . to reach as many people as possible.

In this context, recommendation algorithms are perceived by users as *catching* content, or as Seaver and Seaver Nick (2019) conceptualized, *algorithmic hooks* or *traps*, akin to those laid out for hunting. By adapting content strategies and leveraging knowledge about how to *play* the algorithm, creators align their content with what they imagine to be the *right* strategy for visibility, a form of *algorithmic gossip* where creators speculate that algorithms favour certain types of content (Bishop 2019). Valeria refined her strategy via experimentation, highlighting the efficiency of creators' learning-by-doing practices, particularly as they navigate different affordances and audiences:

> I created a carousel-style explanatory post on Instagram, and it did really well, gaining a lot of engagement. So, I was thinking that I might do [something] similar on TikTok to reach more audiences. But it is not the same, you need to speak differently.

Johana reflected on the heightened visibility she experienced while in Ukraine, which contrasted sharply with her usual audience interactions: '*I'm telling you, the fucking algorithm loves the war. So, my numbers were crazy when I was there. It's crazy. But the question is, like, what do you do with it?*' When asked to elaborate on her use of terms like '*insane*' and '*crazy*', she explained:

> I mean, this is not like you are doing a dumb dancing trend or something. This is war. So, you feel like I want people to see this, and I want the algorithm to catch this because it's important that people see this. But, at the same time, you are like, it shouldn't be like this. Like, people are fucking dying, and it's a viral trend, and you, like, participate in it. But what are you supposed to do?

During the fieldwork, many creators occasionally referred to specific Ukraine-related accounts as 'only doing it for the numbers'. Among the 11 participants, Valeria's content had gone the most viral. Since the start of the war, she has amassed over a million TikTok followers. However, she consistently emphasized that her goal was not just about gaining numbers; instead, she aimed to reach people, using virality as a means to mobilize support for Ukraine rather than seeking fame. Valeria views virality as an activist tool:

> I had some paid collaboration with an NGO about topics like ecology. And I got invited to the European Parliament, so they paid for the journey I had. But I don't make commercial stuff.

Valeria clarified that her TikTok account is not her primary source of income and that her motivation is not financially driven. While she is open to paid collaborations, she insists they must align with the core message of her account, which she defines as activist and political in nature.

Johana, who built a substantial audience by posting about news and politics long before covering the war, shares a similar perspective:

> I do have offers, but I only take something if it really makes sense for me. I can't post about hair dryers. If it has, like, an educational aspect, I would do it, like I did the Snuggs campaign [a Czech brand of underwear promoted as a sustainable alternative to single-use products], but not, like, random shit.

She also highlights her collaboration with the European Parliament as an example of meaningful paid work. Johana joined Valeria on the same trip to Brussels, and the Parliament also sponsored several episodes of her podcast.

Throughout the fieldwork, creators often connected the ability to make their content visible with the potential for financial gain. However, regarding Ukraine-related content, they expressed mixed feelings about virality tied to profit. While they aimed to gain algorithmic visibility, they explained that their primary motivation was activism rather than fame or monetary benefit. This tension underscores their effort to balance visibility with a commitment to activism, focusing on reaching politically motivated audiences and, eventually, raising questions about how creators perceive their roles and responsibilities within the larger conflict's media ecosystem.

Conclusion: ambivalent visibility

This study taps into emerging work exploring how content creators play a pivotal, influential role in shaping international perceptions of the war in Ukraine on TikTok (Divon and Eriksson Krutrök 2025; Marino 2024). By leveraging TikTok's affordances – including popular templates for creation such as 'POV: You live in Ukraine' – they embed war-related content within platform-native trends, reaching broad audiences. Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork with Czech and Ukrainian content creators, this study explores their perceptions of informing audiences and the everyday strategies they use to produce Ukraine-related content.

Our analysis identified three key tensions that creators experience through their presence and labour within war zones: (1) balancing immediacy with visibility in content creation; (2) navigating overlapping roles as journalists, activists and high-profile creators; and (3) managing audience expectations while adapting to TikTok's algorithmic logic. Initially, many creators described their work as simply 'posting what is happening around me', positioning themselves as vehicles for witnessing real-time events. However, as they became more attuned to TikTok's algorithm, their practices grew increasingly strategic, focusing on what drives engagement. This shift reveals a core ambivalence: creators must reconcile the raw immediacy of war-related content with the platform's demand for optimization. This tension becomes especially visible in their use of viral trends, where serious or traumatic subject matter is embedded within playful or whimsical formats (Divon and Eriksson Krutrök 2024), creating a strategic dissonance that helps attract attention to their content.

As Johana puts it, 'the algorithm loves the war' – a phrase that encapsulates both the unsettling paradox of visibility and the uneasy power of TikTok's reach, where content thrives not *despite* its tragic subject matter, but *because* of it. We argue that this reflects a broader struggle creators face in managing their platform presence, aligning with Lehto's (2022) concept of *ambivalent influencers*—individuals who navigate the tension between emotional labour and brand management. While some creators use ambivalent visibility as a strategy to disengage from social media or maintain a low profile (Bernadas et al. 2025), for those operating from war zones, this ambivalence takes on an urgent form. Being seen is not about visibility for commercial gain but about negotiating exposure for survival, resilience and the continued ability to advocate in an unpredictable and often hostile digital environment – where content featuring shattered homes, remnants of weaponry and airstrikes must carefully balance emotional truth with platform risks.

In addition to the typical pressures faced by content creators, such as maintaining output and cultivating financial stability (Glatt 2022), war-zone creators must also navigate profound ethical and physical risks, often in place of brand partnerships or commercial goals. This struggle illustrates what we term *ambivalent visibility*: a condition shaped by the competing demands of algorithmic amplification, audience engagement and ethical responsibility. Emerging from and shaped by platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al. 2015), ambivalent visibility arises as creators embed war-related content within native templates, remix culture and viral formats. Yet their engagement with these platform logics is marked by tension – where the very tools that enable visibility can also lead to trivialization, misinterpretation and backlash.

This tension is further deepened by how creators perceive their roles within a conflict-driven media ecosystem. Despite being recognized as cultural authorities (Cunningham and Craig 2017) – especially in the realms of lifestyle and entertainment (Hund 2023) – the legitimacy of the creators within political communication and journalistic spaces remains contested (Riedl, Lukito, and Woolley 2023). As Kotišová (2023) argues, conflict reporting often reflects a persistent bias that portrays local media professionals as less credible than international journalists from English-speaking outlets. This dynamic echoes an *epistemic injustice* (Divon, Are, and Briggs 2025) experienced among creators, wherein their knowledge is routinely questioned by authority, and in the context of war, we argue, their proximity might be systematically devalued due to geopolitical hierarchies. This bias shapes how many creators define their work: rather than positioning themselves as journalists, they describe what they do in informal terms. As Valeria puts it, she is 'simply someone who does things on social media', aligning with personal storytelling and affective practices (Lokot 2023) rather than traditional news reporting.

Yet, recent research (Klug and Autenrieth 2022; Newman et al. 2024) points to a shifting reality, as creators increasingly serve as critical sources of geopolitical information – visible in both the Russo-Ukrainian war and grassroots reporting from Gaza on TikTok. This turn not only reflects a growing reliance on content creators for real-time, affective war reporting but also invites us – as media consumers – to reflect on the epistemological frameworks via which we come to know war: who is granted the authority to narrate it? Why are certain voices deemed credible? How is that credibility constructed across platforms? More importantly, we argue that in war zones, where traditional media is often censored or obstructed (Carruthers 2011), creators play an increasingly vital role, offering alternative forms of witnessing and circulating knowledge that demands greater recognition.

This paper offers an ethnographically grounded perspective on the evolving role of creators, highlighting the increasing convergence between content creation and news reporting. The experiences of creators like Valeria and Johana reveal how instability, precarity and algorithmic dependency shape the conditions of reporting during times of crisis. Future research should prioritize learning from creators as active participants in shaping information flows and examine how platform vernaculars influence both content creation and journalistic practices. While this study focuses on Central and Eastern Europe – particularly the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine – the convergence of journalism and creator practices calls for continued empirical attention, especially as digital platforms increasingly reshape how information is produced, circulated and understood.

Note

1. We use the term 'content creators' because (a) the research respondents prefer it themselves and (b) it presents a broader category of online personalities.

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