

# TikTok, politics and elections

A briefing for policymakers, researchers, campaigners and creators

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# Background

## TikTok, politics and elections roundtable

On 8 December 2025, Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) and the London Social Media Observatory (LSMO) at Royal Holloway, University of London, convened an expert roundtable to discuss TikTok's impact on politics and elections. The event brought together 45 policymakers, academics, civil society, content creators, and strategic advisors to examine TikTok's growing influence as a politicised space, especially among young people, and its implications on elections and democratic participation.

This briefing paper synthesises insights from the discussion with the participants' recommendations to support effective policymaking, community action and further research.

#### Organisers, authors, panellists and attendees

The TikTok, Politics and Elections Roundtable and this Briefing Paper were organised by a cross-organisational team including: Tanja Hollstein (WFD), Andreu Casas (LSMO), Alex Scales (WFD), Hazel Stutz (LSMO), Katy Murray (WFD), Georgia Dagher (LSMO), Luke Chapman (WFD), Ben O'Loughlin (Royal Holloway University of London), Cecillia Makonyola (WFD), Janina Beiser-McGrath (Royal Holloway University of London) and Magdalena Randall-Schab (WFD).

The roundtable was chaired by Sophia Smith Galer (Viralect). Panellists included Seyi Akiwowo (How to Stay Safe Online and Founder of 21/20 Studios), Photini Vrikki (University College London), Carolina Are (Online Harms Researcher at the London School of Economics and Content Creator), Matteo Bergamini (ShoutOut UK), James Sloam (Royal Holloway University of London), Hannah Phillips (Jo Cox Foundation), Rachel Marcus (ODI Global), and Neil Lavie-Driver (University of Cambridge). Attendees included a cross-sectoral audience of civil society representatives, content creators, academics, journalists, government institutions, policymakers and campaigners.

**The roundtable was conducted under Chatham House Rules and no views in this briefing paper are attributable to or representative of any individual or organisation.**

# Executive summary

## Key roundtable points at a glance

### 1 / From “anyone can be a creator” to sudden political significance

Social media has transformed ordinary users into potentially influential creators, but none more so than TikTok. Its powerful recommendation algorithm can propel content from unknown and established creators to target specific audiences, enabling sudden spikes in viewership, rapid idea virality and widespread belief adoption. This can weaken public debate and electoral integrity, and increase susceptibility to misinformation, especially among those with lower digital media literacy.

### 2 / Blurred boundaries, unclear rules, and concerns of discrimination

TikTok blurs entertainment and political discourse, and encourages passive consumption. There are increasing concerns about inconsistent moderation practices that could undermine accountability and trust in information, restrict expression, and create a democratic deficit. Platform governance should include marginalised groups in shaping moderation standards and accountability mechanisms, to ensure that these voices are not suppressed without clear justification or effective avenues for appeal.

### 3 / Algorithmic pathways, gendered harms, and polarisation

Algorithms that are highly tailored to maximise engagement risk leading users to echo chambers, fuelling polarisation. Workshop participants raised concerns about young men being pushed toward misogynistic “manosphere” content, and about a “womansphere” that promotes anti-feminist ideals, such as #TradWife. These dynamics can reinforce patriarchal norms, deepen echo chambers, and normalise abuse, particularly against women in politics. Racialised women face the most severe targeting, with misogyny and racism intersecting as misogynoir.<sup>2</sup> This polarisation can also narrow who is seen as deserving of political inclusion, shape culture-war narratives, and restrict participation in digital civic life. Intergenerational divides and declining offline community and youth spaces can further exacerbate these trends.

## Key roundtable recommendations at a glance

### 1 / Improve transparency, researcher data access and due process

Policymakers and regulators should mandate clear, auditable moderation standards (including notice and appeal), require platforms to disclose most-viewed content at country level, and expand safe, well-documented researcher access (e.g., APIs/data sandboxes) to data, to build evidence for democratic accountability.

### 2 / Clarify responsibility for political influence and enhance user safety

Introduce responsibilities for transparent disclosures of paid and incentivised political messaging; explore consumer-style safety ratings (e.g., clarity of rules, bias checks, creator support pathways); and support creator advocacy/liaison functions to document and address enforcement anomalies and coordinated harassment (“brigading”).

### 3 / Invest in civic resilience: literacy, cultural spaces and cross-sector coalitions

Scale whole-curriculum digital media literacy (including data skills and educator resilience), citizenship education, and leverage cultural and community infrastructure (e.g., arts venues, youth spaces, and galleries) to support awareness of algorithmic risks, strengthen critical thinking, and rebuild social trust. Civil society, researchers, journalists and creators should also strengthen coordination to monitor moderation consistency and demand increased platform responsiveness to creators.



# Introduction

Understanding how trust is constructed online, and how it impacts both the formation of political beliefs and social cohesion, is essential for safeguarding democratic processes. TikTok's powerful recommendation algorithm and the erosion of boundaries between entertainment and political content mean it can play a significant role in shaping political narratives and engagement. While paid political advertising is formally prohibited, organic political content flourishes, often amplified by influencers, and young people are increasingly turning to TikTok as a primary source of political information. This shift is occurring in an environment with limited regulation and transparency, positioning the platform as a critical arena for shaping identity, participation, and public discourse. Additionally, TikTok's rapid growth and its ownership have heightened concerns that it could be used to assert influence abroad, at a time when the geopolitical dimensions of content governance are increasingly prevalent.<sup>1</sup>

These dynamics present certain risks for democracy, politics, and elections. The platform's engagement-based algorithms can facilitate the rapid spread of misinformation, hate speech, and AI-generated deepfakes, all while amplifying polarising and extreme content. Combined with declining trust in traditional institutions and widening ideological divides, this online environment can threaten electoral integrity and the fairness of democratic competition.

Discussions at the roundtable acknowledged TikTok's dual role: while it empowers ordinary users as potentially influential creators and offers new opportunities for political and social engagement, it also raises concerns about politically extreme, dehumanising, and misogynistic content. Participants noted that these online dynamics are often not only gendered but also racialised: misogyny and racism can function as mutually reinforcing logics in recommendation systems, shaping whose content is amplified, who is targeted and how often, and who is gradually edged out of digital political life. The opaque and inconsistent nature of content moderation and the algorithmic promotion of divisive material on TikTok were identified as major challenges to democratic accountability and social trust. These issues are compounded by significant obstacles to digital media literacy, new regulatory oversight, and democratic participation – particularly for young people, marginalised groups, and the broader integrity of public debate.

This briefing paper concludes that traditional regulatory and educational approaches are not sufficient. It calls for modernised legal standards, enhanced transparency, rights-based guidelines, and collaborative action among regulators, educators, civil society, and content creators to foster a healthier, more accountable digital environment.

## Roundtable I: Content Production, Dissemination and Moderation

Roundtable I discussed TikTok's influence on political discourse, highlighting both its empowering and problematic dimensions. The roundtable surfaced pressing questions about transparency, accountability, and the skills needed for young people to navigate digital spaces.

The discussion underscored the urgent need for improved digital media literacy, especially among educators, and examined how economic and social incentives often prioritise engagement over civic health, which can normalise violence and abuse, particularly against women in politics.

Participants questioned the effectiveness of current moderation standards, noting persistent inconsistencies in how content moderation practices applied to certain types of content, as well as limited avenues for support or appeal. In particular, participants noted that sexuality education and gender-related content creators face a disproportionate risk of censorship, resulting in a double-standard in how moderation standards are applied. Additionally, the discussion raised concerns about algorithm-driven echo chambers, and the amplification of extreme and misogynistic content, specifically for Black and minoritised users, who often report significantly higher levels of unresolved abuse.<sup>2</sup>

Participants also explored how the platform transforms some ordinary users into influential content creators, as well as the low level of control users have over how their content is viewed and amplified once posted, which risks instances of "brigading"<sup>3</sup>

### Key discussion points

#### #1 Closing the transparency and oversight gap in platform moderation

TikTok's explosive growth as a video-first platform has rapidly transformed some ordinary users into influential content creators, blurring the line between entertainment and politics. However, the platform's opaque moderation policies – such as inconsistent bans on sexuality and gender-related content<sup>4</sup> – leave creators, especially those from marginalised groups, uncertain about what is permissible. Research by Are<sup>5</sup> highlights how TikTok's lack of transparency regarding content moderation policies and practices undermines users' rights, raising fundamental questions about freedom of speech and democratic participation in digital spaces. During the discussion, participants noted that same-sex content, queer creators, and sexuality educators can face disproportionate content restrictions. Similarly, participants associated this as part of a broader pattern in which LGBTQI+ and disabled creators' bodies are misread as inherently inappropriate, which they associated with content takedowns with limited avenues for redress. Participants also noted that when their content is removed, or when users experience bans, TikTok's algorithm takes this into account by suppressing the reach of their future content.

## Roundtable I: Content Production, Dissemination and Moderation

To remedy this, roundtable participants called for better platform accountability and further research and platform responsiveness over potentially discriminatory moderation practices, as well as improved and proactive support structures.

Additionally, transparency reports from large platforms are often insufficient, with very limited publicly available data and restricted researcher access to platform datasets (e.g., via TikTok's Research API).<sup>6</sup> These constraints make it difficult to audit moderation practices or assess how algorithms influence political behaviour at scale.

### #2 Algorithmic amplification of patriarchal gender norms and far-right extremism

Participants raised concerns about TikTok's recommendation algorithms, designed to maximise engagement, potentially funneling users – particularly young boys – towards polarised, misogynistic, and extreme content. Regehr et al. (2024) algorithm study<sup>7</sup> shows that even new TikTok users experience rapid exposure to extreme content, often presented as apolitical or humorous, which can promote polarised far-right extremism, reinforce stereotypical gender norms, and reduce opportunities for cross-ideological dialogue. Whilst research suggests that only a small minority of young boys agree with the explicitly misogynistic views expressed by prominent 'manosphere' influencers, it was observed that these influencers frequently exploit boys' anxieties about their economic prospects, their position within dominant masculine hierarchies, and their expectations around body image.<sup>8</sup>

Prominent manosphere influencers create seemingly innocuous money-making and self-improvement content that routinely reinforces heteronormative gender norms, which in the context of the manosphere and recommendation algorithms, also creates an intersection between and pathway to discovering openly misogynistic and far-right ideologies.<sup>9,10</sup>

Similarly, implicitly gendered content in the "womansphere" promotes patriarchal gender norms and anti-feminist ideologies by framing stereotypical gender roles as aspirational. Influencers in this space play a significant role in normalising "far-right, anti-feminist ideologies", such as through #TradWife content, which promotes themes of domesticity, reproductive futurism, and colonial nostalgia.<sup>11</sup> These trends can be understood as drawing on longer histories of racialised and gendered hierarchy, in which ideals of provider masculinity, domesticity, and national 'decline' position some groups as the default norm and cast racialised people as either threats or props, rather than as full political subjects. The panel and open discussion explored how these views are reinforced within online echo chambers that threaten democratic health by discouraging exposure to diverse perspectives, with many users also lacking sufficient offline spaces with the potential to act as a counter-weight to their algorithmically curated feeds (especially as UK youth services and centres that have faced severe cuts since 2010).<sup>12</sup> It was noted that this heightened polarisation is making cross-ideological political cooperation more difficult, with partisans increasingly viewing opposition as immoral, evil and a threat to their community.

### #3 Abuse against those with less positional power

Participants noted that creators who are structurally disadvantaged, including women, racialised, LGBTQ+, and disabled people, face heightened risks of online abuse and harassment, with limited user support from TikTok. Reports from UN Women,<sup>13</sup> the European Parliament,<sup>14</sup> UK Parliament,<sup>15</sup> and Holyrood<sup>16</sup> highlight that technology-facilitated gender-based violence disproportionately affects women in politics, creating a "gendered chilling effect" marked by individual self-censorship, where individuals prioritise their safety above participating in online spaces. When these actors feel that they cannot engage in public debate, including on issues of abuse, this reinforces and perpetuates systemic

inequalities and undermines democratic participation. Harms are unevenly distributed: racialised women and creators of colour both face higher volumes of abuse online and more frequent, opaque moderation decisions, further narrowing which political voices can safely build visibility and influence. Yet roundtable participants stressed that responses must go beyond a purely harm-focused approach, which risks stigmatising communities. Instead, they called for inclusive, intersectional, co-created guidelines and codes of conduct to shape safer, more equitable online spaces, such as those from Glitch Digital Misogynoir Report ([available here](#)) and the Jo Cox Foundation Civility Commission ([available here](#)).

### #4 There is a striking digital media literacy skills gap (including among educators)

Despite the growing importance of digital media literacy, less than 1% of teachers feel "fully prepared" to teach foundational digital and media literacy skills, even though promising pedagogical approaches have been documented in recent years.<sup>17,18</sup> The roundtable panel emphasised the need for a whole-curriculum approach, integrating digital competencies across subjects and building emotional resilience among educators, especially given the increased sophistication of GenAI models and the difficulty in identifying misinformation and deepfakes. The DigComp 3.0 framework<sup>19</sup> was cited as a promising model, but participants highlighted that rapid, reactive safeguarding alone would be insufficient without the steady process of building durable critical engagement skills. Instead, these skills should be embedded across systems, not bolted on in moments of crisis, so that educators are prepared to navigate rapidly evolving threats<sup>20</sup>.

### #5 Youth participation and mobilisation

TikTok was recognised as a powerful tool for mobilising youth towards civic action and political participation. Participants highlighted TikTok's unique ability to engage young people in decentralised political debates that feel authentic and less controlled by rigid messaging. For example, 34-year-old Zohran Mamdani's successful New York City mayoral campaign was cited as an illustration of how using TikTok to produce short, authentic and often humorous content can mobilise support and shift votes away from established candidates. In contrast, traditional political forums, such as political party meetings and conferences, were seen as more filtered and disconnected from the diversity and ethical concerns shaping these debates (e.g., creator safety). The open discussion also emphasised the need to reintegrate arts, culture, and community spaces into democratic life and to involve young people in policy debates in genuinely inclusive ways, avoiding approaches that feel paternalistic, patronising, or tokenistic.

# Roundtable II: TikTok, Public Attitudes, and Regulation

The second roundtable examined the complex interplay between TikTok's audience dynamics, the formation of beliefs, and the evolving landscape of regulation and accountability. Participants highlighted how TikTok's predominantly young user base makes it a critical arena for understanding how "social proof"<sup>21</sup> and visible consensus shape perceptions of truth, acceptability, and political engagement. The discussion revealed that misinformation and extreme content can rapidly gain traction, often exploiting cognitive biases and psychological heuristics. The conversations also revealed that marginalised communities increasingly turn to TikTok for alternative sources of information and belonging.

Key topics included the challenges of regulating influencer-created political content, the need for transparent platform ownership and data practices, and the widening intergenerational and socioeconomic divides in digital media literacy and vulnerability to manipulation.

The roundtable also explored the potential of cultural and civic interventions, such as community centres, arts institutions, and collective storytelling, to foster critical engagement and resilience. Central questions emerged regarding how to de-amplify false claims, empower users with the skills to navigate digital risks, and incentivise platforms and creators to prioritise democratic health and inclusive participation. The session concluded with a call for systemic change, specifically the need for transparent governance, innovative regulation, and collaborative action across sectors to ensure that TikTok and other social media platforms contribute positively to the democratic public sphere.

## Key discussion points

### #1 Social proof, misinformation, and cognitive vulnerabilities

Recent research from psychology has shown how exposure to falsehoods, especially those which have been repeated over time, can shape belief formation, particularly where content exploits economic anxiety and status insecurity.<sup>22 23 24</sup> Online communities often demonstrate the visible collective adoption of beliefs, further conferring "social proof" onto these falsehoods. The panel discussed strategies to counter cognitive vulnerabilities, which can be exacerbated by TikTok's recommendation algorithm, with a call for building "information wealth" by harnessing tools like community notes, fact-checking, and pre-emptive exposure to misleading content. There was also a shared acknowledgement of the need to support greater research into effective platform-led cognitive training for users, as well as research into how belief formation occurs in TikTok's younger user base, in ways that seek to balance avoidance of harm with participatory and youth-centred approaches.

### #2 Political and economic incentives vs effective regulation

The roundtable highlighted a tension between the need for robust regulation to safeguard democratic spaces and the powerful political and economic incentives that drive creators and TikTok itself to prioritise engagement, reach, and influence over civic health. Even if Silicon Valley's "move fast and break things" ethos might encourage innovation, this approach also undermines balanced, accountable technology and effective regulatory frameworks. Participants widely agreed that more effective regulation is required to ensure large platforms take more responsibility for content moderation and provide better access to platform data by independent researchers to provide additional oversight.

Additionally, despite TikTok's blanket ban on paid political advertising, participants noted a significant grey area: creators may still receive in-kind compensation, such as increased credibility or visibility, which can indirectly incentivise political messaging. It was also noted how, in the UK, regulators have limited and diffuse responsibilities for political advertising, meaning that sponsored political content would continue to be incentivised until additional scrutiny and oversight measures are introduced.<sup>25 26</sup>

### #3 Bridging the intergenerational digital media literacy divide

Younger users often navigate TikTok's risks more adeptly than older cohorts, who are often more exposed to fringe content and addictive design features. However, there is an urgent need for societies, schools, and parents to level up their digital skills to better support young people. The discussion emphasised that tailored interventions, such as the de-amplification of false claims, robust fact-checking, and "wellbeing prompts,"<sup>27</sup> could help to address the distinct needs of different age groups, although it was roundly agreed that further research into the effectiveness of these approaches is necessary. Additionally, there was broad agreement that fostering critical thinking and resilience in both young and older users, and rebuilding physical community spaces, would help to strengthen inclusive and effective digital media literacy.

### #4 Risks in data practices, ethics and geopolitics

The discussion surfaced concerns regarding privacy, data sovereignty and national security. Participants expressed a shared concern over how users' data was handled, with limited transparency of how data is collected, stored, and potentially accessed, posing risks not only to individual privacy but also to broader democratic accountability. TikTok's ownership was perceived to heighten these risks, raising further questions and concerns about effective regulatory oversight, flexible ethical standards, and the potential for misuse of data to support strategic state influence. The discussion called for clearer privacy and safety standards,

greater transparency in advertising and data use, and robust ethical frameworks, such as consumer-facing safety standards. Together, these initiatives could contribute to a more ethical and safer online experience, with ethical and safety benchmarks that would support creators and users to make informed online choices. It was collectively recognised that these issues are central to building trust and safeguarding democratic values in a global digital environment.

### #5 Beyond harm reduction and towards accountable tech ecosystems

Panellists argued for a shift towards rights-based technology governance and collective action, such as unionisation for creators and deeper collaboration between researchers, campaigners, and technologists. In contrast, moderation and censorship-based approaches, which were noted to have been the focus of many regulators and philanthropic organisations to date, were judged to be insufficient. Amnesty International's<sup>28</sup> research was cited to illustrate how platforms like X (formerly Twitter) have failed to protect marginalised and minority women from violence and abuse, and it was noted that TikTok and other social media companies still lack robust policies to address these harms. The discussion highlighted the need to move beyond reactive online safety frameworks and towards long-term, proactive governance that holds platforms accountable, not treated as a crisis response to harm after the fact. When considering recent rights-based policy examples, such as Australia's ban of social media platforms for under-16s, participants were divided on its likely effectiveness but broadly agreed that future evaluation of the policy would be helpful, recognising that industry-wide resistance to meaningful change persists. There was consensus that overcoming this resistance will require more ambitious, systemic approaches to tech governance and user protection which situate safety within ongoing design and governance models, rather than as an add-on to platform policing.<sup>29</sup>

# Consolidated recommendations

## For Policymakers

- **Mandate transparent moderation practices with guaranteed due process:** Require platforms to publish clear, enforceable moderation standards (including shadow bans), and guarantee meaningful notice, evidence, and appeal routes for takedowns, with specific monitoring for discriminatory patterns in enforcement. Regulations must protect users' rights and democratic participation while avoiding undue burdens on smaller market entrants to foster innovation and competition.
- **Enhance platform transparency and researcher data access:** Require social media platforms to clearly disclose their most-viewed content, starting with the top 1,000 most-viewed public posts on their platforms per country;<sup>30</sup> and to provide improved access to platform data for researchers, to be able to independently and accurately assess concerns about the platform.
- **Strengthen regulatory oversight and accountability for advertising disclosures:** Regulatory bodies should strengthen oversight of political advertising, including content creators on social media platforms. This should explore ways to ensure creators are directly accountable to their audiences, within their own channels, especially to support disclosures of paid political advertising and incentivised political messaging. Disclosures must be mandatory, timely, and transparent.

- **Consider introducing consumer-style safety scores for social media:** Developing independent safety scores (e.g., comprising of elements including the clarity of rules, bias checks, and creator safety pathways), modelled on food and road safety regimes, would support informed public social media usage and incentivise platform improvements in ways that other industries originally resisted, but are now widely accepted as in the public interest.
- **Recognise and support cultural infrastructure to mitigate social harms:** Fund community centres, arts institutions, and youth spaces as venues to promote digital media literacy, debate, and inoculation against manipulation and social polarisation. This should recognise cultural and information wealth as public goods and a key feature of social resilience with the potential to mitigate fragmentation and isolation.

## For Academics and Research Institutions

- **Expand access and methods for audit:** Advocate for safe researcher APIs and data sandboxes; prioritise mixed-methods work on gendered algorithmic pathways, social proof and online belief formation, and cross-ideological interaction; and fill gaps in research on women's online behaviours and positive community formation.
- **Examine how political content is moderated across platforms:** Compare how political content is curated on TikTok relative to other social media platforms, identify the ideological or cultural biases that are being moderated, and evaluate these effects on users' political behaviours, particularly in the context of elections.
- **Advance research into countering social proof and cognitive vulnerabilities:** Test scalable techniques for improving cognitive resilience to manipulative tactics, such as pairing misleading content with

corrective context and using wellbeing prompts to support online wellbeing. Additionally, improve the evidence base on the downstream belief change arising from instances of manipulation among different age and literacy cohorts.

- **Further investigate the effectiveness of digital media literacy approaches:** Document and evaluate whole-curriculum approaches to digital media literacy that integrate digital competencies across subjects and build emotional resilience among educators. Share lessons and good practices.

## For Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

- **Whole-curriculum media literacy:** Co-design teacher-friendly modules which consider the increasing sophistication of GenAI models (aligned with promising approaches like the EU Digital Competencies Framework); integrate digital media literacy across subjects (e.g., integrating this with statistics in maths courses); and provide emotional-resilience support for educators delivering sensitive content. This should also include a focus on critical thinking alongside education on the business models of online influencers and forms of gendered disinformation.
- **Develop rights-based video guidelines:** Translate community standards from text-based social media to standards fit for the era of short-form video (addressing topics like visual cues for misogyny, harassment, medical/sexual education) and evaluate their efficacy across diverse contexts.
- **Build coalitions demanding platform accountability:** Invest in leadership development programmes and networks for advocates, educators, and organisers working at the intersection of online harm, democracy, and technology. Coordinate with journalists,

researchers, and creator communities to document moderation inconsistencies, escalate cases, and push for responsive liaison channels within platforms (e.g. politics/public-interest officers), particularly to support marginalised creators.

- **Leverage culture and play to support digital media literacy and social bonding:** Use theatres, games, galleries, and youth spaces to host interactive workshops that simulate algorithmic feeds, train people to identify manipulation, and encourage cross-group dialogue to counter echo chambers with lived, creative encounters. This should also foster greater awareness of the political and financial economy of content creation.

## For Content Creators

- **Community stewardship and safety:** Establish shared protocols for moderating comments, responding to "brigading" and supporting at-risk audiences; document platform enforcement anomalies to inform advocacy.
- **Disclosure and ethical partnerships:** Adopt transparent sponsorship practices; audit advertisers for civic impact; and diversify revenue to reduce pressure toward sensational engagement.
- **Collaborate and organise:** Explore union-like structures or collectives to negotiate platform policies, safety tools, and revenue-sharing, shifting incentives toward quality, factual content and creator wellbeing. A key demand should be for sufficient dedicated liaison roles within social media companies to build relationships and understanding of online abuse and digital exclusion of different online communities. Engage in structured partnerships with researchers, civil society, and platforms to pilot co-governance models that influence moderation practices and algorithmic design.

# Endnotes

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- 30** Join Mozilla Foundation’s call for YouTube, TikTok, Meta, LinkedIn and X to disclose their most viewed content - [access online here.](#)

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