

# TikTok drama channels are turning into online intelligence agents

In October, a TikTok user named Matthew Heller posted a video recorded moments after a small traffic accident at a Florida intersection. In the video, a woman named Maddy Gilsoul comes up to the window of Heller's car and starts screaming at him. Heller captioned the video, "I got hit from behind. My car was hit from behind while I was stopped. #lamborghini #aventador #hornblasters." The original video has since been deleted from TikTok, but Heller left a version of it up on his Instagram.

In a world without TikTok, the incident would have remained a small but contentious traffic accident, the fault of which would have been determined by insurance companies. Instead, thousands of users on the shortform video app argued about who was to blame. Was it Gilsoul, who, according to Heller's video, seemed to have clearly clipped the back of Heller's Lamborghini? Or was Heller at fault? At one point in the "news cycle," TikTok users accused him of "gaslighting" them, after new footage surfaced from a nearby security camera that seemed to show him hitting Gilsoul first. Or was this incident even real? Heller appeared to be the founder of a company called HornBlasters, which sells custom car horns. A car horn salesman suddenly finds himself at the center of a viral traffic accident? It all seemed too perfect.

*Young users pore over random trending videos, constructing elaborate conspiracy theories*

As the numbers on Heller's video began to climb into the millions, TikTok's army of commentators rushed into the trending topic to debate and analyze what was happening. A

TikToker named @ugolord, who calls himself “The TikTok Attorney,” asked his followers to watch the footage of the accident and decide who was liable. A user named @pushpeksidhu from Toronto posted an update on the accident that was watched half a million times, sharing footage from Gilsoul’s account that users hadn’t seen yet, seemingly proving Heller was at fault. A user who goes by @doctor.ryan made another video combining Heller’s account with the new security camera footage for a definitive look at the whole scandal.

Drama-reaction accounts like these are riding a huge wave of popularity right now, thanks to an obsession within the TikTok community with investigating, analyzing, and passing judgment on the content going viral on the platform. The app’s young users pore over random trending videos, constructing elaborate conspiracy theories and even doxxing the people featured in them. Most often, these campaigns to unmask other users are driven by some sense of justice.

#### *A teenage version of the OSINT community*

In each of these instances, the app’s aggressive recommendation algorithm awakens, pushing the controversies to millions of users, generating hundreds of videos, thousands of comments, and too many views to count. The app has become home to a teenage version of the OSINT (or “open source intelligence”) community, made famous by outlets like the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFR Lab) or investigative site *Bellingcat*.

The biggest account weighing in on the “Lambo crash” trending topic was @TizzyEnt, an account with 3.8 million followers run by a film director named Michael Mc. During the course of the Lamborghini content cycle, Mc posted several updates, at one point even connecting with Heller and sharing additional details about what happened.

If you’re on TikTok, you’ve no doubt seen Mc’s videos. On an app defined by permanently teenage Hype House dancers, Mc’s

graying beard and low baritone voice definitely stand out, as does his presentation style. He specializes in what right-wingers might call “cancel culture” or what mainstream journalists might call “internet drama.” He’s part of a network of popular TikTok users who have risen to prominence thanks to the TikTok community’s current fixation on crowdsourced investigations into matters both real and conspiratorial or imaginary.

Mc and his collaborators unmask racists, report anti-vax nurses to their respective hospitals, and help “cancel” members of TikTok’s rogues’ gallery of conspiracy theory truthers, fascists, and viral main characters. But with a massive young audience hungry for accountability, or more accurately, viral justice, these TikTokers are finding there is a fine line between citizen journalism and vigilante information warfare.

*Mc and Paterno spent days locked in a feud, dueting videos with each other*

In the case of the Lamborghini saga, TikTok users drew lines and took the side of either Heller or Gilsoul, flooding their accounts with nasty comments. Heller’s TikTok account is no longer active and Gilsoul hasn’t posted since October. But this kind of work can get much more intense.

Shortly before Mc waded into the Lamborghini drama, he led a campaign against a FedEx delivery driver named Vincent Paterno, who claimed in a TikTok video that he would not deliver packages to any homes without an American flag or with a Biden/Harris sign in the front yard. Mc posted Paterno’s Facebook page on TikTok and said he would be reporting him to FedEx. Then Mc and Paterno spent days locked in a feud, dueting videos with each other.

“You’re such a piece of shit,” Mc says in one video. “Do you know your wife messaged me to tell me how she and her children do not agree with you? How she begged you not to post this?”

And now you've posted a second time – and she's getting threats, by the way." Then Mc scolds his own audience for sending threats to Paterno and his family.

The whole episode ended with Paterno reportedly getting fired from FedEx. In a final update, Mc jokingly threatens to brand "@tizzyent" on Paterno's back. This kind of content is far from anything you're going to get on a mainstream media outlet – maybe on Substack – but Mc's audience can't get enough of it, flooding his comment section with tips for more video investigations.

*"I look at the internet like one giant small town"*

Mc told *The Verge* he's trying to bring some accountability back to how people behave on the internet. He isn't actively trying to get people fired – though he does, and isn't quiet about it on his account when it happens.

"There's an old expression that 'bad gas travels fast in a small town.' If you live in a small town and you do something terrible, everyone knows about it," he said. "I look at the internet like one giant small town in the sense of: If I put something out there, my objective is not to get someone fired unless their job is directly harming people. So like a nurse refusing to get vaccinated. She could be infecting people. That's a thing. Or a police officer harming people. That's the thing."

According to Mc, he started out making videos just trying to debunk misinformation and conspiracy theories that came across his For You page, the central feed where TikTok users see content recommended to them. He said earlier this year, as America began its vaccine rollout, the app became inundated with anti-vax content. In August, a user sent him a video of a woman who went by @antivaxmomma, who was bragging about selling fake vaccination cards on Instagram.

"[Users] find someone doing that sort of thing, and they don't

know how to deal with it themselves,” he said. “They reach out to people like me, and go, ‘Hey, can you see what this person is doing? Can you help with this kind of thing?’”

*“The algorithm kind of promotes tribalism”*

Mc and the network of other TikTokers he works with sprang into action, identifying the woman as Jasmine Clifford, who was then charged by law enforcement with conspiracy, and offering and possession of a forged instrument. According to Mc, his regular collaborators include @ThatDaneshGuy, @auntkaren0, and @rx0rcist, all of whom who have made headlines in the last few months for their flashy videos exposing and publicly shaming various villains within the progressive-leaning world of TikTok.

There is a feeling, one Mc shares, among many long-time TikTok users that individual accounts have to step up and personally deal with the app’s rampant misinformation, extremism, and conspiracy theories. As Mc sees it, his account wouldn’t need to exist if TikTok actually moderated its platform properly. “The algorithm kind of promotes tribalism,” he said. “You get inside of the bubble when you start believing that your perspective is the only one that matters.”

*“Something fundamentally changed in this work about 10 years ago”*

But the videos these users post are a tightrope walk of investigative journalism, punditry, and open source intelligence that could easily fall into the same trap as Reddit’s libelous and disastrous r/FindTheBostonBomber experiment. But according to Emerson T. Brooking, a resident senior fellow at the DFR Lab, we are well past the point where journalistic institutions can decide who can and cannot conduct OSINT research.

“I’m not gonna position myself as a legacy gatekeeper; I think something fundamentally changed in this work about 10 years ago,” he told *The Verge*. “You need to use communities and

enthusiasm to try to accomplish some good.”

Brooking clarified, though, that performing this kind of work out in the open – or at least on an app like TikTok, which has a trending topic-focused algorithm that blurs together responsible TikTokers like Mc and more rogue accounts that are doing it for clout – could easily spin out of control.

“If you look into how *Bellingcat* is structured,” Brooking said, “whether their most famous, prominent analysts have this public presence, they’re doing their work on a Slack channel, actually. They’re not doing every bit of it on Twitter.”

Making things even more confusing is when large media organizations begin to weigh in on these fairly low-level TikTok dramas. Being the subject of a TikTok spat is one thing, but it’s another to elevate it into a news story and turn a local incident into international headlines.

*“I think I’m gonna have to start saying in every video, ‘Hey, don’t, don’t threaten them’”*

Both Mc and Sophia Smith Galer, a London-based senior news reporter for *VICE* who also runs a personal TikTok account with over 275,000 followers, said traditional media has a habit of turning the volume up on these minor naming-and-shaming campaigns happening on TikTok. Smith Galer told *The Verge* the media often legitimizes the vigilante justice being carried out by random TikTok users when they turn these viral scandals into news stories.

“We saw this with the rush to cover TikTok users investigating the disappearance of Gabby Petito, or the reporting around TikTok users erroneously claiming that a furniture company was somehow trafficking children during the US presidential election,” she said. “TikTok users overanalyzing videos going viral on the app is nothing new.”

During Mc’s crusade against Paterno, the FedEx driver, the two men traded barbs across their social media platforms and Mc

did share Paterno's Facebook information and reported Paterno to FedEx. But the ensuing media swarm, kicked off by this article from *TooFab*, brought the story to a national stage, eventually getting coverage in the *New York Post*. Paterno is still on TikTok, by the way, where he's now posting anti-vax content.

But according to Smith Galer, when mainstream media outlets cover these stories, the more responsible users like Mc, the genuinely nefarious bad actors spreading disinformation, and just the random shitposters get swirled together into a trend that typically makes the chaos on TikTok worse.

Like Brooking, Smith Galer sees the current wave of amateur OSINT happening on TikTok as a net positive, but also a recipe for chaos. There are currently around 80 million active users on TikTok in America, but Statista estimates that roughly a quarter of those users are between ages 10-19. That is a lot of children learning how to doxx each other.

"What's fun about all of these is how they are universalizing OSINT skills, but what is not fun about all of these is the lack of media literacy and the innocence in which content creators commit contempt of court, libel, or spread harmful misinformation," Smith Galer said.

And this is the central dynamic Mc said he's been struggling with recently. He said he was committed to using his TikTok account to exposing various bad actors, but he has noticed that, regardless of how even-keeled his presentation style is, his followers – or users who find his videos in their For You pages – aren't as interested in making sure things are done the right way.

"I think I'm gonna have to start saying in every video, 'Hey, don't, don't threaten them. No death threats, no violence.' If you want to write to someone's employer and say you don't like what that employee did, that's your prerogative to do that.

But no, you calling an oncology department and saying, 'I'll kill all of you' – I don't believe that my followers did that," he said. "But I'm still going to put it out there just in case any of my followers get really upset about something or someone who sees one of my videos."

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