TikTok’s podcast boom might be a bust

This is Hot Pod*,* The Verge*’s newsletter about podcasting and the audio industry. Sign up here for more.*

The common wisdom goes that video is the key to podcast discovery: you take the juiciest clips from your show, hope one goes viral every now and then on TikTok, and then that wider (and younger) audience becomes your new listeners. Uncah jamz is the prime example of this, sending a bunch of new attention to *Call Her Daddy*. But even podcasters who have cracked the code on TikTok have found the relationship between on-app engagement and actual listening to be weak, at best.

That issue may soon be moot. Last week, seemingly out of nowhere, the US House of Representatives passed a bill that would force Chinese company ByteDance to sell TikTok or otherwise ban it from operating in the US. If it passes the Senate (which is a big “if”), the social media landscape in this country would be transformed — the podcasting landscape less so.

Larger outlets use TikTok as part of a multi-pronged strategy — and most of the time, it doesn’t take off. Gen Z-skewed celebrity interview shows like *Call Her Daddy* and *The Really Good Podcast* fare well on the platform, but they are the exceptions. The prospect of a TikTok ban and how it impacts marketing strategy has barely come up during internal discussions at some of the bigger audio companies, I hear.

NPR’s *Planet Money* is one of the few public radio shows that has found its way on TikTok. Featuring quirky explainer videos starring Courtney Theophin and Jack Corbett, the *Planet Money*

TikTok has 785,000 followers, which is 325,000 more than the main NPR account.

“Anecdotally, we do find people come to know about the podcast because of the TikTok (and vice versa) based on emails/comments/surveys/etc.,” *Planet Money* executive producer Alex Goldmark told *Hot Pod* in an email. “It is just very hard to quantify or measure which downloads are caused by any one specific TikTok post.”

Even after working hard to develop a following on the platform, Goldmark knows better than to rely on it. “We adapted to TikTok. Jack and Courtney do amazing work meeting the style and tone of the audience there,” he said. “We’ll adapt to what’s next. We’ve been fine since leaving Twitter as a company. We’ve never thought we should count on any platform to stay the same.”

Gary Arndt, an independent podcaster who hosts top-ranking history show *Everything Everywhere Daily*, has managed to get some of his explainers on topics like the Little Ice Age and the development of Route 66 picked up by the TikTok algorithm. But through his link tracker, he can see that very few of those viewers actually bother to click off the platform to listen to the show.

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“Even when a video gets multiple tens of thousands, I would be lucky if I got more than single-digit numbers of clicks in a day,” he said. “The truth is, most social media apps don’t want people to leave their environment. They want to keep them there.”

For him, it is no match for traditional marketing like buying promos on similar shows or advertisements within podcast apps like Overcast and Castbox. And that purchased media seems to be working — Arndt says he gets about 1.5 million downloads a

month.

“Even if it’s an independent podcast, it’s still a media property,” he told *Hot Pod*. “Yet a lot of podcasters seem to think that they can do nothing, or they just share stuff on social media. That doesn’t work.”

But there are certain cases where TikTok can move the needle. Cristina Lumague, who hosts true crime show *Espooky Tales* and Latin American history podcast *Historias Unknown*, has amassed 215,000 followers on TikTok and occasionally produces posts that get more than a million views. While her downloads are more modest — about 2,000 a week — Lumague says a viral video can temporarily triple her listenership.

Lumague may have an edge for a few reasons. Her demographic skews young — she says the bulk are between 24 and 30 years old. She has also successfully adapted to TikTok’s preferred style of front-facing explainers using green screens. Even if TikTok does not grow her audience in a consistent way, it is a key part of her distribution.

“I always hear people say TikTok doesn’t convert to listeners,” Lumague said. “It does for me. And I’ve gotten I don’t know how many messages saying, ‘I found you on Tik Tok and I love it,’ and so yeah, losing the discoverability and engagement would be a lot.”

As the Senate considers how to proceed with the bill, Lumague has joined other TikTok users in advocating against the ban. She is reposting calls to action on the app and emailing officials (“not calling, because I don’t like phone calls”).

The most common refrain I have heard from podcasters is along the lines of “we’ll just go to Instagram.” But for Lumague, it’s not an adequate replacement. Even if Reels is similar in format, she says it prioritizes aesthetically beautiful content.

“TikTok is way, way more casual. I could just have a green screen, and I don’t have to look great on video, and it would do fine,” she said. “The podcasts that do well on Instagram have professional-looking videos with really nice cameras. You can tell they have a team.”

Even Arndt, who gained a following of 180,000 on Instagram as a travel photographer, says Instagram is a bust for podcasts. “Somehow, the video content does even worse there,” he said. He is no fan of TikTok, but “to be honest, it is one of the better ones.”

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