

Ripped 2024

IRL by Heather Meyers

Honestly- I blame Lizzo for this whole thing. If my kid (who was about to leave for college) hadn't asked me to learn a choreographed dance to *About Damn Time*- I probably would have never fallen down the TikTok rabbit hole.

Me: "What the hell is this?"

My Kid: "It's a TikTok dance. C'mon- it's fun."

Me: "What the hell is a TikTok?"

My Kid: "Video content someone creates"

She showed me the For You Page.

Me: "What the hell is all this?"

My Kid: "It's the FYP- a kind of landing page where the popular videos are posted."

Me: "Who decides who gets in?"

My Kid: "Views & algorithms."

I swear EVERYBODY was doing this damn Lizzo dance: teenagers on their front lawns, classically trained ballerinas on pointe, Grandmas in the grocery aisle. It was all in good fun, and the tune was catchy. After watching video after video- it suddenly occurred to me if I had an account- I could watch the videos my kid was creating in faraway dorm rooms and unfamiliar frat houses I'd never visit. I could stay connected. Maybe even be cool. My heart bursting with endless possibilities, my fingers couldn't download that app with the singular musical note logo fast enough.

Suddenly I was asked to create a profile for myself.

I hesitated for a moment. Here was an opportunity to create a whole new identity. I could be whoever I wanted to be. A unique user name with a fresh bio in 80 characters or less. Ageless. Faceless. Anonymous. Mysterious. I felt like James Bond- an international spy whose martini is shaken, not stirred.

Now on Facebook- everybody knows who you are. Happy Birthday messages from friends. Throwback Thursday pics from high school. Photo of the perfect plating of an Angus cheeseburger floating in a sea of flaxen Wisconsin cheese curds. Breezy tropical vacations with a yard glass of margaritas amid an endless infinity pool during a girl's weekend. Proof you had a golden ticket to that sold out, over-priced, 3-day concert everybody was clamoring to attend but few could attain. Some Facebook Groups most certainly will deny a request to join their membership unless you prove residency in a certain area, are invited in by another member, and pledge allegiance to the all powerful community guidelines in written form.

But in the wild, wild west of TikTok- nobody gives a shit who you are. Just that you are there, watching.

I mean in the beginning- TikTok was just a tiny app called Musical.ly- simply a platform where kids made videos of themselves lip-syncing to music. Then it was bought out by Byte-Dance who saw the unbridled potential for bigger creator content. The form ebbed and flowed into longer videos allowing for deeper dives into subject matter whose only limitation was the imagination of its creators. Downloaded over 2 Billion times, the newly branded TikTok gave YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook a serious run for their money. The US soon became the biggest consumer group of TikTok in the world. And with Byte-Dance based out of China, it didn't take long for the US government to declare TikTok a major security risk. But the real bottom line- the US government could not control the narrative. And it couldn't make money off of it. A double negative deuce dropped into the pool of life.

I cautiously opened the door to an odd, brave new world.

And jumped directly into that pool, full force, with both feet. Scrolling incessantly past video content I found uninteresting. Half watching others, only to move on midway through. More than once I said to myself- “Damn this is dumb” But someone made me stop mid-scroll. It was the sight of Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who made me stop fast in my tracks. There she was: the great AOC talking- and it felt like she was talking to me. She spoke about women’s rights, transgender rights, voting rights- the list goes on. I didn’t want to lose her.

Me: “How to I keep seeing a creator on my FYP?”

My Kid: “You have to follow them”

Me: “How the hell do I do that?”

My Kid: “See that + under the profile pic? Tap on it”

I smashed that tiny red plus sign and suddenly me & the AOC were connected! Soon my feed was filled with the likes of NPR, The Wall Street Journal, Rachel Maddow, Trevor Noah, Representative Stacey Abrams, UnderTheDeskNews. Follow. Follow. Follow. Which led me to more content creators addressing current events from their perspective. Witnessing local school board meetings where elected officials and community members hurl accusations at one another like candy at a parade. Watching angry volleys over hot-button issues on the Senate floor. Protesters quietly recapping the day’s events while inside tent encampments. Bombed out cities in rubble with someone crying in the distance. I started getting updates directly from TikTok creators rather than the nightly news on TV.

This is when the algorithm learned more about who I am, despite my desire to remain anonymous.

From there- the algorithm served up a buffet of offerings on my FYP. For unexplainable reasons- the TikTok universe plucked out a vast array of content to lure me further in: vegetarian baking, deep cleaning tips, which used cars are shit on rims, music videos I hadn’t seen in decades, toys from my childhood. That one hit hard. I re-watched that damn video flashing old advertising photos of beloved toys I’d long forgotten. Bursts of memories came tumbling out from whatever dusty corner they’d been hiding in. Almost able to smell the fabric of my doll’s dress or feel the peg of the big wheel beneath my feet. Where had those things gone?

My curiosity got the best of me one night as I wondered what it meant when the *Tap to watch Live* announcement appeared.

Me: “So what happens when someone goes Live?”

My Kid: “You just tap on the screen to join the Live”

Me: “So then what happens?”

My Kid: “You get to participate”

So I tap. Suddenly the screen fills with dozens of comments arriving at a fever pitched pace on the screen beneath a content creator hosting the Live from his home in a sky-blue kitchen seated behind a marble topped counter, surrounded by hanging plants. I see a count in the far corner & realize it’s the number of people who have also joined this Live- 32 so far & climbing. The Host is reading comments out loud & laughing over a funny joke made by a commenter. He suddenly looks up & says “Hey there & welcome in!” He grins and addresses me by my screen name while waving at me through the screen. Wait. He knows I’m here? Commenters follow suit by typing hello to me with a variety of emojis trailing behind. Wait. They know I’m here, too? It was strange- but kinda cool at the same time. It was surprisingly easy to enter into the current conversation. The topic: favorite bands. The host took music requests and played them via Alexa while we discussed which bands we’d seen in concert after standing in a line outside the Ticketmaster box office overnight to buy lawn seats for the same price as a case of beer.

I realized “Hey- I fit in here.”

The TikTok rabbit hole opened wide and I chased the algorithm down the labyrinth.

Sometimes I see love. Sometimes I see hate. Sometimes I just kept scrolling.

But now I'm scrolling past real people in real time. Not so easy to scroll past someone sitting alone, hosting an empty room. It's like throwing a party & nobody shows up. Honestly- this is how I began filling up my Friends list- connecting with people during Lives. Out of 50 people on my friend list- I only know 2 of them in my everyday life.

One day a new content creator appeared on my FYP posting a video after a particularly brutal Midwestern snowstorm. She told a story about, Bill, her elderly neighbor she hadn't seen outside for a few days. His mailbox was full of mail, so she worried. Turns out he did need help and she humbly reminded us all to take care of each other, check in on each other. It doesn't take much to be kind. Well her video went viral- its why the algorithm showed it to me. There were thousands of views, likes, shares, reposts, and positive comments commending her actions. I added to the growing numbers. Then I noticed the red circle blinking around her profile picture indicating she was hosting a Live right now! So I joined- curious to know more about this altruistic creator. The inside of an old garage came into view, stacked from floor to ceiling with boxes and bins of all shapes & sizes, haphazardly balancing against each other. There was barely floor space open enough for the host, who sat on a stool smack dab in the middle of the menagerie. The benevolent host was responding to a comment and thanking the viewer for their sweet remark. She updated us on Bill- who was doing great now that the storm had passed. And how he absolutely loved the scent of her sandalwood perfume so much that he bought some for his granddaughter. Princess Perfume in the attractive sapphire bottle with atomizer could be yours too- on sale for the next hour in her TikTok shop. Just click on the link below. Hit that "like" button. Be sure to share this Live with all your friends. And if you want more- simply subscribe to her channel at the low, low price of \$9.95 a month. She announced her plans to host a "Subscriber only Live" event this Friday night at 6pm CST.

Damn. I'd been duped.

Content comes at me like a waterfall- rushing information with an overwhelmingly heavy pour. Never quite sure if what I am seeing is the truth, an absolute lie, or somewhere in between. Barely time to fact check. TikTok is like an enormous, free-range box of chocolates- you never know what you're going to get. Over time I swiped my way into much more than I could have ever imagined, meeting people I never would have otherwise met. Some good, some not & some just plain weird shit. The algorithm calculated its way to feed my need to see more, do more, be more than I am. And the deeper I go- the clearer it becomes that perhaps I'm not mysterious at all. Perhaps I just don't know who I am anymore.

Now I do admit- I have my favorite content creators. Damien plays the ukulele on the Big Island from various venues every night with palm trees swaying on the beach in the background. DJ Tony Stewart puts out the 80s vibe like we were back clubbing at Medusa's. I once stumbled into a Live and quickly bonded with a group of Gen Xers over a shared past of drinking water out of garden hoses. We were latch-key kids who felt an aerosol can of Aquanet and a lighter was a solid method of self defense, still hold our first vinyl record in high regard, knew how to operate the oven at age 7, and discussed at length what music should be on the ultimate mixed tape. Followers from each region of the US were represented- and the farthest away award went to Betty from Australia. One night while discussing how upsetting it was to have no reruns of the Gong Show available, and how much we missed the Love Boat/Fantasy Island Saturday night lineup- someone wrote in the comments: "I just love you all to pieces. Wouldn't it be nice to meet IRL?" I thought to myself- I know TikTok has a lot of moving parts- but this is getting ridiculous.

Me: "Who is IRL?"

The Kid: "Really? You don't know?"

Me: "I don't"

The Kid: "Ma- go look it up"

I quickly jumped to the good book of Google, urban dictionary edition & searched it out.

IRL: *an abbreviation that distinguishes our normal, everyday life from the digital lives we lead online (In Real Life).*

Of course I knew that. But had somehow forgotten.

To be honest- I'm 50 & sitting smack dab in the intermission of life and I realize I have been shaken, not stirred, by it all. I don't necessarily recognize my surroundings anymore. Time does that. There have been changes. And it can feel lonely. My generation may be the last to remember what life was like before algorithms. Back when streetlights and fireflies called us home. Now I see a world where we simply don't connect despite all the technology that is supposed to make connecting easier. While grocery shopping I plug in my earbuds and keep my head in my shopping list. I've stopped smiling at people passing by in the produce aisle because nobody was smiling back. I'm very lucky to have dear, sweet friends IRL. And sometimes I don't want to call them late at the night while I'm feeling all the feels. Or I'm just too tired to go out, find parking, try to have a meaningful conversation over a noisy bar, pay a check, and drive home. I simply tap the screen and a different world opens up. One I can enter at my own risk & convenience; leave when I'm tired, not caring what I'm wearing or how I look. At least I'm showing up somewhere. Lured out of my cozy post-pandemic cocoon. Still wary of packed movie theaters where somewhere in the sold out house someone is coughing near buckets of popcorn. Sometimes I do venture out into the real life. I ride my bike to the peak of a high hill and scream at the top of my lungs just to hear my own voice right before I plunge down the side. The air whips against my face as I hold steady to either brace for the sudden impact of a terrible fall or speed to the bottom and follow the path leading to the next hill and the next and the next.

I'm still here.

You may never know who I am in the tide pool of TikTok- but I'll be out there making waves until they shut the concession stand down. Maybe TikTok will be banned, maybe it won't. I'd hate to lose the connections I have made. My money is on the creators to find a way to provide content for hungry consumers. Now that the door is open, there is no going back. I'll do my best to keep the algorithm guessing on TikTok, and in real life.

Me: "Hey- have you seen those German dudes?"

My Kid: "You mean the guys who rap only in German?"

Me: "Yeah- who the hell is Barbara and what's the deal with her rhubarb cake?"

My Kid: "You know.... they made a TikTok dance...."