

TikTok's battle between politics and popularity

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Calls to ban TikTok have turned the political landscape into something more like a theatrical spectacle.

During a recent hearing by the US House Foreign Affairs Committee, [Republican Congressman Michael McCaul made bold claims](#) that downloading TikTok opens a personal information gateway for China.

The hearing revealed a lack of understanding and technical knowledge among lawmakers, as they asked elementary questions about TikTok's ability to connect to wi-fi or access device cameras.

Based on such superficial inquiries, Congress drew conclusions about the threat posed by TikTok without a fundamental understanding of what it actually is and how it operates.

Misguided national security rhetoric was employed to justify actions against TikTok and suppress foreign investments, particularly from China.

While there have been bans on government employees having TikTok, in May Montana became the [first US state to ban the app](#) on all devices.

The Biden administration has threatened to do the same.

Banning TikTok in the US could be seen as a form of political censorship like what is already enforced in China.

Some argue that the use of security and privacy concerns by Washington is a thinly veiled excuse, as the essence of the 'TikTok ban' issue lies in politics rather than genuine security or privacy concerns.

TikTok is not fundamentally different from similar platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and many emerging competitors when it comes to data security.

It is primarily an entertainment platform, connecting content creators with audiences.

The distinction lies in the fact that TikTok is owned by the Chinese company ByteDance. ByteDance, founded by Chinese entrepreneur Yiming Zhang in 2012, has become the world's largest [unicorn](#) with a [valuation](#) of \$220 billion (as of 2022).

The company has attracted investments from 30 prominent [investors](#), including Softbank, Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs, Tiger Global, KKR Japan, Sequoia Capital, as well as Chinese investors.

While TikTok is owned by ByteDance, its diverse shareholding structure means it is inaccurate to classify it solely as a Chinese company.

TikTok experienced rapid market success upon its launch in the US in 2017, becoming [the most downloaded app](#) in the country by October 2018. Globally, it has amassed over three billion downloads and boasts over one billion monthly active users.

Concerns surrounding TikTok primarily stem from its Chinese identity, despite the common safety challenges faced by the entire industry regarding data collection and analytics.

TikTok owes much of its success to its AI algorithm, particularly its [information flow funnel](#) mechanism.

These algorithms function akin to a talent show, allowing creative content to be selected based on the preferences of the target audience.

In other words, TikTok's algorithms enable unknown content creators to reach specific niche audiences interested in their particular content.

If the content resonates and gains enough audience engagement, it can reach a larger audience and rise to the top, regardless of the creator's established fame or fan base.

Conversely, TikTok's algorithms filter out content that fails to capture user interest, meaning internet influencers or politicians may find it challenging to push their messages through the selection mechanism if their content is found to not be of interest to the audience.

What sets TikTok apart from other social media platforms is its ability to connect content creators or influencers with their desired audience, as long as their content or products appeal to a niche market.

TikTok operates on a model where 'content searches for the right audiences,' shifting away from the traditional model of 'audiences searching for the right content.'

This [shift](#) has dismantled the entry barriers prevalent on platforms, where established creators/influencers tend to dominate due to [early-mover advantages](#).

The real challenge posed by TikTok, lies in the platform's ability to inadvertently but intelligently push content that resonates with audiences at the right time, leading to audience addiction and a more passive approach to content discovery and critical thinking, particularly among teenagers who form a significant portion of TikTok's user base.

It is crucial to recognise that data collection and sharing present challenges across all social media platforms, not exclusive to TikTok.

TikTok has made substantial investments in initiatives like [Project Texas](#), which aims to isolate US user data through Oracle's cloud infrastructure, safeguarding the data stored on American soil and preventing unauthorized foreign access.

Additionally, source code audits serve as viable methods to address any safety concerns that may arise.

Merely prohibiting TikTok may not be the ultimate solution to address data privacy concerns, let alone cybersecurity threats faced by modern society.

China's approach to internet governance, exemplified by the strict control of the Great Firewall, deviates from the fundamental principles of freedom and liberty on public platforms.

It transforms the Chinese internet into a surveillance network, characterised by the widespread use of face-recognition cameras and internet 'nannies' responsible for monitoring online activities.

TikTok is inaccessible to users in mainland China due to restrictions imposed by the government's Great Firewall, preventing Chinese content creators from spreading potential political influence.

Washington's attempts to ban TikTok establish a worrisome precedent that jeopardises the openness of the internet and introduces unprecedented threats to information democracy.

These actions accelerate the fragmentation of the internet, emphasising local data storage, virtual boundaries, and closed internet domains, which challenges free flows of information, data and capital critical for global trade.

TikTok has 150 million users, including five million businesses, in the US, so banning it can have political repercussions. It is crucial to note that TikTok enjoys significant popularity among young Americans, with Generation Z constituting 60 percent of its user base.

Politicians risk missing out on engaging with nearly half of the population on TikTok if they fail to grasp how the platform operates.

TikTok also serves as a platform where information not covered by mainstream media can reach a targeted audience and create ripple effects among a broader audience.

This paradigm shift aligns with Washington's increasing embrace of techno-nationalism, advocating for state-guided and controlled technology rather than global market forces.

While this concept has long been accepted in various countries, its growing prominence in Washington shapes the evolving cyberspace.

Resolving these issues means there will need to be collective efforts to establish a [global digital order](#) that takes into account China's rise in digital technology and the diverse needs for data sovereignty and governance from different nations.

The key question is whether banning TikTok alone can effectively address data privacy and safety concerns.

Privacy concerns related to TikTok require collective measures within the industry. It's important for governments to strike a balance between protecting data privacy and ensuring the benefits of an open and connected digital environment.

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