

The TikTok test

Can the wildly popular app address questions about the hold that Beijing has over it amid revived calls in the US to ban it?

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WASHINGTON - On TikTok, anyone can be world famous for 15 seconds. Short videos frequently go viral, featuring anything from cantankerous cats to soothing sea shanties, popularising new dance moves and fashion trends, or sharing users' reviews of books, restaurants, travel destinations, or tips for daily living called life hacks.

Millions of Americans, mostly teens, use the social media app every day, making it a constant if benignly addictive part of their day. But to several Western governments, including in Washington, the app poses real national security risks.

TikTok is owned by ByteDance, a Chinese IT company, and Western concerns fall primarily along two lines: that the app harvests too much data from users, and that the Chinese government can access this data and use it for nefarious purposes, if it wishes.

"TikTok is not just another video app. That's the sheep's clothing," wrote US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) member Brendan Carr in June, when he urged Apple and Google to remove TikTok from their app stores over its data practices.

In the United States, concern over TikTok has ebbed and flowed over the years. The Trump administration first said in September 2020 [that it would ban TikTok over national security concerns](#), an attempt that the courts blocked later that year, leaving the issue for the Biden administration to deal with.

The calls have grown again in recent months for the US government to ban it, particularly from Republican critics, and erupted afresh

after a BuzzFeed report in June concluded that data about US users had been accessed by engineers in China.

TikTok executives have repeatedly denied the allegations, stressing in statements and testimonies at hearings that there are strict controls over who can access US users' data, and that the Chinese government exercises no influence over such operations.

Now, the Biden administration is working on [a deal that would allow the popular app to continue to operate in the US](#) without ByteDance having to sell it, but it remains to be seen if it will succeed and if Beijing will accept the terms of the deal.

Does TikTok really pose national security risks and are these concerns fair or fear-mongering? And what makes it different from the data privacy concerns people have of other social media giants such as Facebook and Twitter?

The furore over TikTok cannot be separated from the wider context of the US-China rivalry and mistrust that cause each side to view the other with suspicion - not helped by China's track record of business espionage, nor by its quest for technological supremacy.

Nor are concerns over TikTok limited to Washington. In Europe, the app faces data privacy probes in Italy and Ireland. And India [banned the app over national security reasons in June 2020](#), in response to a border clash with China.

How governments eventually come to terms with TikTok will have implications for data privacy and national security, and whether there can be space for a Chinese social media giant in a space currently dominated by its Western counterparts.

A meteoric rise

It is difficult to understate what a juggernaut and cultural behemoth TikTok is.

Launched outside China in 2017, it now has more than one billion active users globally. In the US, it has an estimated 80 million monthly active users, most of whom are between the ages of 16 and 24.

TikTok has also established itself as one of the top online platforms for American teens, according to a Pew Research Centre study in August.

It found that 67 per cent of teens say they use TikTok, second only to YouTube, and 16 per cent of all teens even say they use it "almost constantly".

TikTok is also forming a bigger part of Americans' news diets - according to Pew this year, 33 per cent of adult users say that they regularly get news from TikTok, up from 29 per cent in 2021 and 22 per cent in 2020.

Given this ubiquity, one concern has been that TikTok was censoring and moderating content, including on issues sensitive to China, and that Beijing could use TikTok to bolster its public image in the US.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute reported in September 2020 that TikTok had engaged in censorship on topics ranging from LGBTQ+ issues to the repression of Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang.

Its findings echoed a report from The Guardian a year earlier, citing leaked documents showing that TikTok's content moderators were told to censor videos mentioning "demonisation or distortion of local or other countries' history" such as Tiananmen Square and "highly controversial topics" like Tibetan independence.

In response, TikTok said the documents were outdated, and that it did not take orders from Beijing.

Data privacy and national security

By far the larger concern over TikTok, however, is over the kind of data it is collecting and how that data is being used. TikTok's own privacy policy states that it automatically collects users' approximate and precise locations, keystroke patterns, biometric data such as faceprints and voiceprints, and even information identifying objects and scenery that appear in image and video uploads.

"Once accessed by personnel in Beijing, there is no check on the... Communist Party (of China) using the extensive, private and sensitive data about US users for espionage activities because compliance with the People's Republic of China's 2017 National Intelligence law is mandatory in China," the FCC's Mr Carr said in July, in testimony at a hearing on protecting military personnel from fraud.

To US lawmakers, TikTok's Chinese ownership is what differentiates it from other social media giants, which collect similar data. In several hearings, Congressmen have focused on grilling TikTok executives on the extent to which China can access TikTok's collected user data.

The app's chief operating officer Vanessa Pappas said at a hearing in September that while TikTok has employees based in China, it also has strict access controls around the type of data they can access.

"That data is stored here in the United States. And we've also said under no circumstances would we give that data to China," she said.

The bulk of critics' concerns appear to stem more from what TikTok and China could do with user data, and less from what it has been proven to have done, with some analysts reckoning that TikTok's actual transgressions lie somewhere in between.

"To the best of my knowledge, the evidence doesn't support the idea that TikTok is part of an attempt by the Chinese state to infiltrate or subvert Western democracies," wrote British journalist Chris Stokel-Walker in his book, *TikTok Boom*, published in July 2021.

"TikTok isn't a social media sleeper cell waiting to be activated remotely on millions of Westerners' phones," he said.

The app, argues Mr Stokel-Walker, is guilty more of a little white lie than a big con: obscuring the fact that some data does end up in China, where its engineering base is located.

Analysts also argue that TikTok stands to lose a lot of international credibility and undermine its business in markets outside China if seen to be a lackey of the Communist Party of China, giving it little incentive to capitulate to Chinese demands for data.

Still, there have been consequences of the backlash in the US. Troops are banned from using TikTok on government-issued devices, and this year, the House of Representatives issued an advisory that Congressmen and employees should not use TikTok.

A balanced approach

Should Republicans win control of the House in November's midterm elections, which they are favoured to, TikTok will come under even greater scrutiny.

The idea of banning TikTok, however, is not popular. One objection is that a ban would be governmental overreach, with such a heavy-handed anti-capitalist move being more at home in Beijing's playbook than in Washington's.

Others argue that a ban would be an overreaction born out of paranoia - better instead to hold TikTok to high standards, while beefing up the US' overall data privacy regime.

According to media reports, the deal being worked out could involve TikTok storing its US user data exclusively on servers in the US, run by Oracle, a US-based cloud computing company. Oracle would also monitor TikTok's algorithms to ensure they are not influencing the content that users see, at the request of Beijing. TikTok would also be required to create a new board of US security experts.

Whether they can work out a way for TikTok to continue operating in the US has implications for other Chinese app giants such as WeChat, which the Trump administration also sought to ban.

Mr Stokel-Walker argues that some of the unease and discomfort over TikTok stem from it being born of a different tech landscape and sociopolitical culture far from Silicon Valley.

Facebook, YouTube and Twitter were born from "a libertarian, free speech ideal; a laissez-faire attitude towards free enterprise", he wrote, unlike TikTok which was "born in an authoritarian state that has oversight of all aspects of a business and the content hosted by it".

Moreover, TikTok's success in America shows that Chinese companies can succeed there, he said.

"We've spent years watching the rise of China and Chinese tech from the outside, looking at it as an alien, other way of doing things... for the first time, we're seeing the potential of technology with Chinese roots being used by everyday people, every day," he wrote.

In some ways, therefore, TikTok can be seen as a test case for whether the US can accommodate a rising technology giant of different origins and ultimately subject to a different regime, or whether its tech governance standards are too far apart from China's to do so.

At the same time, it will also be a test case of whether a Chinese company can commit to the sort of reassurances that would soothe Washington's concerns.

That sort of nuance and compromise would be much more preferable to a ban.