

TikTok Infamous

TikTok, a relatively new and now widespread social media video-sharing platform, has taken over the virtual world. The app has topped 2 billion downloads¹, and is rapidly encroaching on Instagram's popularity among younger generations. Or, at least, it was, until some of the world's largest markets began to ban the app. India prohibited usage of TikTok on June 29, 2020, and President Trump has issued an executive order to ban TikTok in the United States by September 2020 if its central operations are not sold to an American company--ByteDance, the current parent company, is based in China. These two jurisdictions represent crucial markets for app developers, and substantial portions of TikTok's current user base. The app's future does not look bright elsewhere either.

What makes TikTok different from other apps like Snapchat or Instagram is its origins and associations with the Chinese government. The internationally controversial regime of President Xi Jinping has the power to demand that TikTok turn over user data from all accounts, including over 100 million Americans. Regulations on how the government treats said information are very different and quite a bit more lax in China. In India, the government criticized ByteDance for "stealing and surreptitiously transmitting users' data in an unauthorized manner to servers which have locations outside India," and provided this as justification for their ban.² Fear of the same happening in America, as well as reports of the app secretly collecting clipboard data from its users provide the beginnings of a rationale for a similar ban in the U.S.³ Perhaps of even further concern, China's own counterpart of TikTok, Douyin, which implements additional restrictions and censorship specific to the Chinese market, has allegedly collected facial recognition data, among other practices deemed invasive by critics.⁴

Most of these allegations are unproven, however, and in the cases of both the U.S. and India, as well as Australia, political and economical factors, not data privacy, are thought to be the main source of governmental concerns. President Trump has notoriously waged legal battles with Huawei, another Chinese tech giant, and now lumps TikTok into the same category. With elections happening soon, the administration's motivations are questionable. The same can be said to an even greater degree in India, where tensions with China are incredibly high.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Should the government have the power to control what apps we use? What if users don't mind corporations (even foreign ones) having access to their data?
2. To what extent do national security considerations outweigh personal liberties?
3. Does this mean we can't, or shouldn't, use apps, software, or other products from countries with which conflicts might exist or arise?

¹ TechCrunch, "TikTok tops 2 billion downloads"

² The Independent, "TikTok ban: Why is Trump considering action against Chinese app in US?"

³ The Independent, "TikTok ban: Why is Trump considering action against Chinese app in US?"

⁴ Forbes, "Yes, TikTok Has A Serious China Problem—Here's Why You Should Be Concerned"