

TikTok: To ban, or not to ban, that is the question

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Last summer, former president [Donald Trump signed an executive order](#) issuing an ultimatum – either social media craze TikTok, sells to an American company by September 27th, or the app would get banned from the Google or Apple mobile app stores. This order came following a line of accusations that the Chinese-based app is a threat to US national security. TikTok sought a [preliminary court injunction](#) to stop the ban and this effort was eventually granted on the grounds that a new election was in the coming weeks and banning the app would “impinge on the rights of new voters”. Months later, an election has passed, a new president is in office, and TikTok continues its exponential growth in the US market. Yet, the once excessive media coverage and op-eds have all but disappeared. This begs the question; what should the U.S. do about TikTok? While many contemplate, I ask – why is this even a question? Why does the perceived right to unfettered Internet access always trump privacy and security concerns always – why do we have such low standards? TikTok *is* a threat to national security and should be banned.

An obvious retort: why should we care? Facebook and Twitter continue to collect highly personalized user data with little legal repercussions, so why should we care about an app that is mostly lip-syncs and spilled tea? However, TikTok is really the first superstar social media out of China. Its parent company, Byte Dance, is based in Beijing. This brings up two concerns. The first is that TikTok is engaged in surveillance, and the second, is that it engages in authoritarian Chinese propaganda and censorship.

First, there are some teeth to the surveillance argument. While there is no evidence to confirm the Chinese government is spying through TikTok per say, as long as ByteDance is based in China, the company is subject to government regulation which means it could be pressured to hand over its data. While the data itself may not contain private conversations, such as in the case of [WeChat](#), TikTok does have personal information including name, email, date of birth, which when tied to faces in photos and videos, in combination with behavioural data in likes, searches, and follows, a lot can be mined. The wealth of its database, in particular, collected from young users, was the subject of a [recent class-action lawsuit](#), where ByteDance, on TikTok’s behalf, settled with a \$92 million payout. This lawsuit opened further questioning into the biometric data TikTok stores, which will continue to be a topic in [ongoing investigations](#).

Also, TikTok has been [caught](#) previously accessing devices’ clipboards, which could contain highly sensitive information about a user, depending on previous keyboard strokes. The app claimed to stop this practice following an iOS update which ousted them last July.

As for the propaganda and censorship argument, despite the popular belief that TikTok is a platform for dancing videos, TikTok can actually be quite political. Take for example, a 17-year old user in New Jersey, who posted a video which begins seemingly innocently - an eyelash curler tutorial – but soon turns to “put them down and use your phone you are using right now to

search up what is happening in China, how they're getting into concentration camps". After posting the video, [TikTok suspended her account](#). Another censorship technique employed are shadow bans, where TikTok pulls your video from the algorithm so it cannot be widely spread. The difficulty of knowing whether censorship is occurring or not, is that you can't know; TikTok's algorithm is a secret sauce – emphasis on secret. Censoring content which is critical of China's government only increases their [sharp power](#).

Some would say that the position to ban TikTok is an extreme one – but why? Maybe we empathize with those who use it as a way to make money, or maybe we're just accustomed to an argument over the right to free expression. Beyond the security rumours, what makes TikTok dangerous enough that it should be banned? After all, TikTok has been willing to work with the US government, unlike Facebook or Twitter. All of these arguments highlight the conflict of liberal democracies to balance the tensions between unfettered Internet access and underlying privacy and security concerns. This is why framing the argument on TikTok as a national security concern, as opposed to one on individual rights, is so important. While individual rights are held in high regard in Western society, as illustrated by the U.S Congress, a threat to national security could justify the ban by outlining the concerns of surveillance as well as censorship are valid, as suggested in the paragraphs above. Plus, we are already seeing hyperlocal bans of TikTok take place in [India](#), within the [U.S. military](#), and in corporations, such as [Wells Fargo](#) - suggesting to ban is not a fallacy.

And for those who use TikTok for business, this argument isn't proposing that an app like TikTok shouldn't exist, it does offer a platform for users to create and share content easily, but there are replacement versions of it already appearing on Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts. Additionally, if TikTok were to continue, changes of ownership or automated auditing of some sorts would have to take place to proactively address security concerns. However, it should be noted that these approaches may not be met with retaliation from the Chinese government, such as the case for Microsoft, which received [threats](#) in a Chinese newspaper when considering buying the app.

In the end, the case of TikTok will set a massive precedence for the way in which the US and the rest of the world approaches tech policy going forward. Some solace is offered in the growing U.S. [bi-partisan support](#) that TikTok does pose a security threat. The ban of TikTok should not be fueled by anti-Chinese sentiment, it should be banned because it makes citizens and countries vulnerable to China and compromises national security.