

# Facing Trump ban, China's TikTok embeds itself into U.S. culture

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

James Henry, known for slapstick comedy and dance videos on TikTok, got an email last fall from the app's creator relationships team. Would he be interested in joining Mariah Carey to film something for TikTok to

promote her holiday song, "All I Want for Christmas is You"?

Henry jumped at the chance. Soon he was filming from a mansion in West Hollywood, starstruck. Sony Music Entertainment, Carey's record label, compensated him for his time. But there was something valuable for TikTok in the deal, too: loyalty. "It really makes me grateful," Henry said. "It gives me the feeling that I would want to stick with this app."

TikTok, the app with an uncertain future owned by China's ByteDance Ltd., has been building a vocal contingent of young supporters in the U.S., working behind the scenes to turn creators into superstars, arming them with brand deals and introductions to Hollywood power brokers. The effort builds on what Instagram and Vine have done to build relationships with digital influencers in the past. And TikTok has just begun spending hundreds of millions of dollars to help its stars make a living—a step that Facebook Inc.'s Instagram has been historically unwilling to take.

The effort has given TikTok growing influence over American culture, which is not an accident, says Brett Bruen, who served as the White House director of global engagement in the Obama administration. He believes China and ByteDance are playing the long game. "It's all a localization strategy, which allows you to not only achieve relevance but respect," he said. "The most effective advocates for your company and for policy decisions are those local influencers and local partners."

U.S. President Donald Trump has ordered ByteDance to sell its U.S. TikTok assets and he has threatened to ban the app if a deal doesn't happen in coming weeks. Embedding the business deeply in society, while providing a livelihood for thousands of rising American stars will make it harder to uproot the app from the country. Creators say they haven't been asked to make public statements in support of the app, but it comes naturally to some.

"TikTok is being transparent, they want to be held accountable, and they're doing all the right things," said Nick Tangorra, a 22-year-old singer songwriter with 1.2 million followers. "I've got tattoos. If I get another one I might get a little TikTok one."

When Trump said he planned to ban TikTok in early August, the app was flooded with videos supporting the service and calling out the president for distracting from more serious issues. A few days later, TikTok announced the first recipients of a \$1 billion fund to help U.S. creators build careers on the platform. Soon after, the company rolled out a TV advertising campaign to thank creators for making TikTok a ubiquitous part of everyday American life.

"We are reiterating that we are committed to their long-term success on TikTok, so they can continue to be their creative selves," said Kudzi Chikumbu, TikTok's director of creative community.

Henry, 26, with 3.1 million followers, talks to his TikTok creator manager every week—a high-touch relationship Instagram has never pursued. The company put him in their 2018 Super Bowl commercial and connected him with NBC's "The Voice." They send TikTok swag to his house. For his July birthday, a personalized card arrived, along with various flavors of gourmet popcorn. He laughs at the idea that any of this is meant to increase his affinity for China. "They just understand that their business is where it is because of the creators," he said.

Beyond money, TikTok tries to get its creators TV contracts, music deals and talent agents, moves that could build even more influential U.S. advocates for the app.

When comedian Boman Martinez-Reid had a video go viral under @bomanizer, Chikumbu picked up the phone to see if he needed anything. The TikTok executive connected Martinez-Reid to talent

agency Scale, where he ended up signing. Now Martinez-Reid has done videos with MTV and has 1.3 million followers.

Tangorra, the singer songwriter, struggled to gain a large following on more established U.S. social-media platforms. Gaining an audience on TikTok was much easier because the company provided hands-on help. It featured him in digital ads encouraging users to download the app in 2018, providing instant visibility. Since then, TikTok has connected him to advertising jobs with the National Football League, the New York Giants and other major brands. Record labels are suddenly more interested in his work now.

"What kind of cultural power does it give TikTok when people feel like TikTok is their job?" said Karyn Spencer, senior vice president of partnerships at influencer marketing firm Whalar.

TikTok has been particularly adept at cultivating minority talent that can escape notice at other social-media platforms, Spencer added. In February, TikTok flew hundreds of Black creators to Los Angeles for an event focused on collaborating and discussing issues in the Black community. Makayla Did, who hosts TikTok's Black Voices Live show, has a growth consultant at the app who helps improve her shows. "If I ever needed an idea for a video, she would help me out," Did said.

Did, 21, is not worried TikTok will go away, despite Trump's threats. She doesn't have a personal relationship with other social-media companies and isn't even verified on Instagram.

"TikTok is home," she said.

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