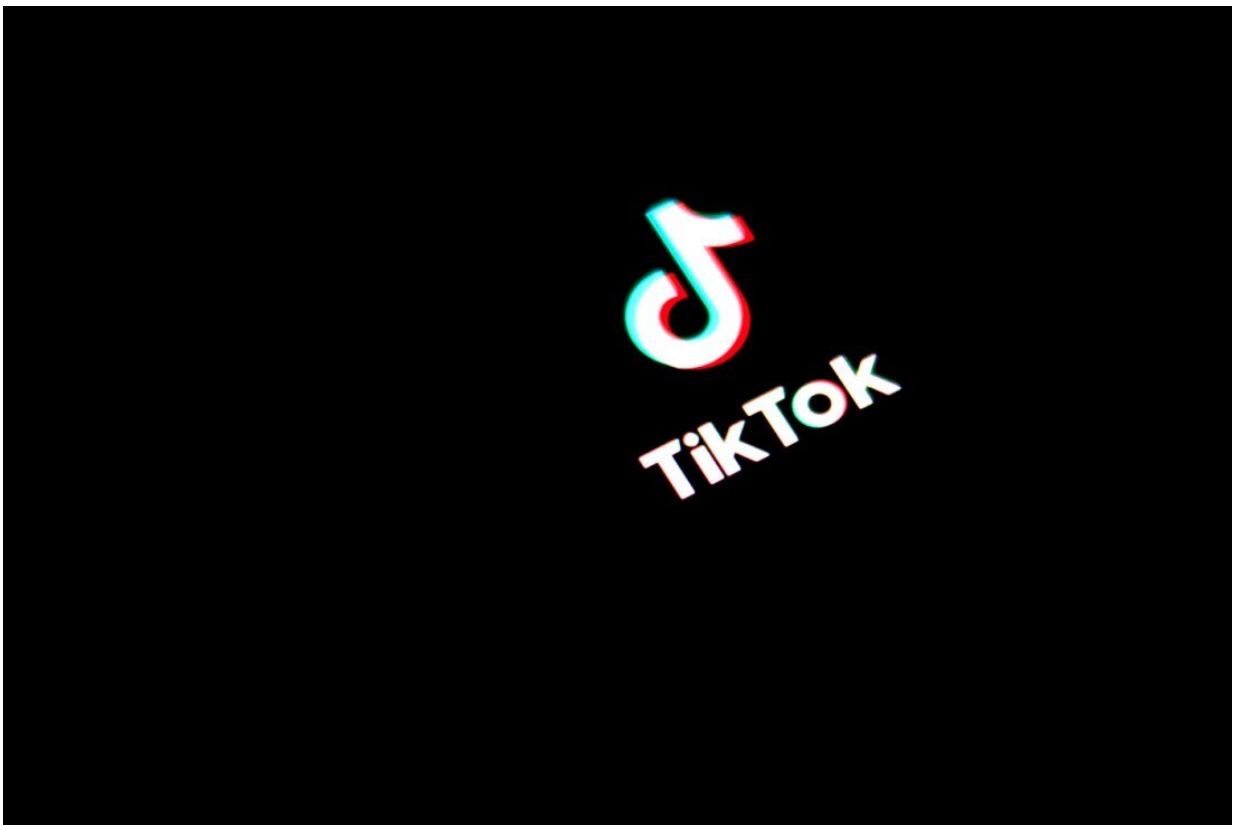


'Digital Red Scare' or Chinese propaganda tool? As legislators push to ban TikTok, users wonder what will happen

March 8 2023, by Beth Treffeisen



Credit: Matthew MODOONO/Northeastern University

U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Mark Warner plans to introduce a bill this week that will allow the U.S. to ban Chinese

technology, including popular social media platform TikTok.

Warner told Fox News that he is working with Sen. John Thune, a Republican from South Dakota, on a bill that will give the U.S. power to ban or prohibit foreign technology where necessary. The fear, Warner says, is that TikTok can be a propaganda tool.

The news follows an announcement from the White House last week, which told [federal agencies](#) that they had 30 days to delete the app from government devices. Canada and the executive arm of the European Union also recently banned the app from official devices.

With all the buzz around banning TikTok, many questions have arisen over [data privacy](#) and what's next for the popular social media app.

Below, Northeastern experts answer some of the most pressing questions:

Why is Congress proposing legislation to ban TikTok?

"So what makes TikTok unique?" questioned John Wihbey, an associate professor of media innovation and technology in the College of Arts, Media and Design at Northeastern.

If anything, it is because it is a Chinese company subject to the law in China, which allows access to users' information. But nothing is stopping the Chinese Communist Party from obtaining data from Americans from the open market.

TikTok is at the center of concern due to national security concerns and panics over the increasing prominence of China, says Meryl Alper, an associate professor of communications studies at Northeastern.

"I've seen the focus on TikTok referred to as a digital Red Scare," Alper says.

There are a lot of reports, including Federal Trade Commission lawsuits and others, showing companies collecting data about individuals and then selling it for pennies per person to others, including bounty hunters or companies doing background checks, says David Choffness, the executive director and founding member of the Cybersecurity and Privacy Institute at Northeastern.

What would be concerning is if the Chinese Communist Party said the algorithm needs to change to spread propaganda intentionally.

"That's not outside the realm of possibility," Wilson says.

What is happening with bans inside the U.S.?

Those with [federal government](#)-issued devices are on a deadline to delete the app from their phone. The White House already does not allow the app on its devices.

Suppose the federal government or a state university wants to ban TikTok on state-owned devices. In that case, that is fine, says Choffness. However, it begs why the government isn't banning other apps, such as Strava or Map My Run, which shows users' geolocations on military bases.

There isn't anything fundamental that TikTok is doing that is objectively worse than any other app, Choffnes says.

"Why aren't we treating those as the same security risk when they've already been known to have sort of direct harms to U.S. security?" Choffnes says.

How can the government ban the app, and if they do, can you still access it?

The implementation of the ban matters, says Christo Wilson, an associate professor at the Khoury College of Computer Sciences at Northeastern and a founding member of the university's Cybersecurity and Privacy Institute. There's no good solution, he says.

Wilson says one option is to tell the app store to delist the TikTok app. But, it will also not work because it doesn't prevent users from downloading the TikTok app from the internet.

Another option would be to go to the internet services providers like Verizon, AT&T and Comcast, and ask them to block traffic to TikTok.

"That's also deeply troubling," Wilson says. "That's a whole different avenue for government censorship. You're not enlisting all the (internet service providers) to become part of a censorship apparatus. That's what the internet looks like in China."

"We don't have that here," Wilson says. "But if you are really serious about banning TikTok, that's how you would have to do it—become the thing we hate."

What is the response of TikTok and other social media platforms?

TikTok's commercial success in the U.S. is impeding local social media giant's advertising dollars, with Meta Platforms Inc. and Alphabet Inc.'s YouTube developing short-video services in response to the app's popularity.

"The product is awesome," Wihbey says. "It's super compelling. It's so much more engaging than pretty much any other platform."

However, TikTok owner ByteDance is distancing the service from its China roots, including hosting [user data](#) in Singapore. Threats of a ban on the app have lingered for years in the U.S. Former President Donald Trump nearly forced the sale of TikTok's U.S. operations to Microsoft Corp. and Oracle Corp before his term expired.

There's a "huge" amount of global competition in the information communications industry, says Wihbey. TikTok is the first non-U.S. entry into this game.

But there are geopolitics and also industrial competition dynamics that are playing out, Wihbey says. TikTok has gobbled up a lot of advertising dollars that American companies would like to get back.

TikTok is complaining that they are unfairly targeted because they are mining and harvesting data, just like other social media apps do as part of their business model.

What data are TikTok and other social media apps collecting on you now?

When visiting the privacy policies of TikTok and other social media apps, it is apparent that the companies are collecting as much data as possible from the users. Examples include everything you upload to the app, including your name, age, email address and internal messages, and extend to sharing your contacts on your phone, geolocation and even your financial information.

The companies use the data to personalize the feed, Wilson says. On the

other hand, companies are also using it for advertising. The companies have trackers on the web, so they can see what users are doing even when they are not on the app.

"That's then being merged with what you do on TikTok, which is creepy," Wilson says.

Should you be concerned about your data privacy?

"I worry about what's happening behind the scenes," Wihbey says.

The app "unwittingly" has users share all of their contacts and requires them to share their I.P. address and location by default, he says.

Wihbey is especially concerned about people working in sensitive or interesting industries such as defense, tech, or a place with a lot of intellectual property. For example, China is known for stealing a colossal amount of intellectual property from the United States, Wihbey says.

There is potential for governments to assemble [sensitive information](#) about people with a rich profile, including who they are, who they know, what they do, and where they are.

"And that could be exploited," he says.

The other concern is that the more you know about someone, the easier it is to hack anything they're doing, Wihbey says, whether that's an email account or passwords and usernames.

"I think people are rightly concerned," Wihbey says. "It's unclear to me how different TikTok is versus other (social media apps or] what Meta does in terms of trying to get lots of data."

What makes TikTok different from other social media apps like Facebook, is that the "For You" feed is filled with videos of followers you do not know or follow, Alper says. It is entirely based on an algorithm the company produced on that user.

Although it is a novel approach and part of what makes TikTok so exciting, "you never know what you're getting is based on," Alper says. Or where that data came from.

What laws are protecting your data now?

The FTC has clamped down on a few of these companies for violating their terms of service. For example, Facebook had a \$5 billion fine for the Cambridge Analytical scandal, and Twitter is also under a consent decree.

"There's a pretty high bar for what actually violates the law," Wihbey says. "Whereas I think on a common sense level, you be like, "Oh, actually, you shouldn't be doing that with my data.'"

There are no rules about how people moderate content. Social media apps can do what they want under the CDA section 230.

Data collection, at least at the federal level, you have laws like COPPA preventing the data of people under the age of 13 from being collected. There's HIPPA for health records, but that doesn't apply to social media apps. The Electronic Communications Privacy Act restricts government wiretaps on telephone calls and electronic signals. The Federal Trade Commission Act empowers the FTC to go after apps or websites that violate its privacy policy.

But, assuming the policy is truthful, those companies are in the clear.

"That gives you carte blanche to do whatever you want," Wilson says.

What are some potential solutions?

At the bare minimum, Wilson wants to see regulations similar to the California Privacy Rights Act. It does a couple of basic things: giving users the ability to opt out of data collection for advertisers, the right to request the data the company is collecting, and the right to delete it.

However, the implementation of this law could be faster and more balanced, Wilson says.

A few states have this law, but at the federal level, there isn't much.

More robust policies could be stronger protections for children up to age 18. Or instead of an opt-out system, there is an opt-in system, which the European countries have enacted.

There also could be stronger laws around [data collection](#), from not allowing apps to access geolocation and for holding sensitive data or only using data that benefits the company and that they cannot sell it.

However, lobbying is intense, Wilson says. As a result, there is a predisposition not to regulate and a lot of reluctance to interfere in the free market.

"There's not nearly enough enforcement," Wilson says.

Provided by Northeastern University

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