

Gap grows between TikTok users, lawmakers on potential ban

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Supporters of TikTok hold signs during a rally to defend the app, Wednesday, March 22, 2023, at the Capitol in Washington. The House holds a hearing Thursday, with TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew about the platform's consumer privacy and data security practices and impact on kids. Credit: AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana

On the one side are dozens of lawmakers on Capitol Hill issuing dire warnings about security breaches and possible Chinese surveillance.

On the other are some 150 million TikTok users in the U.S. who just want to be able to keep making and watching short, fun videos offering makeup tutorials and cooking lessons, among other things.

The disconnect illustrates the uphill battle that lawmakers from both sides of the aisle face in trying to convince the public that China could use TikTok as a weapon against the American people. But many users on the platform are more concerned about the possibility of the government taking away their favorite app.

[TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew](#) said during a [nearly six-hour congressional hearing Thursday](#) that the platform has never turned over user data to the Chinese government, and wouldn't do so if asked.

Nevertheless, lawmakers, the FBI and officials at other agencies continue to [raise alarms that Chinese law](#) compels Chinese companies like TikTok's parent company ByteDance to fork over data to the government for whatever purposes it deems to involve national security. There's also concern Beijing might try to push pro-China narratives or misinformation through the platform.

"I want to say this to all the teenagers out there, and TikTok influencers who think we're just old and out of touch and don't know what we're talking about, trying to take your favorite app," said Republican Rep. Dan Crenshaw during the hearing. "You may not care that your data is being accessed now, but you will be one day."

Many TikTok users reacted to the hearing by posting videos critical of lawmakers who grilled Chew and frequently cut him off from speaking. Some called a potential TikTok ban, as some lawmakers and the Biden

administration has reportedly threatened, the "biggest scam" of the year. And others blamed the surge of scrutiny on the platform on another tech rival, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg.

But few expressed fear of possible Chinese surveillance or [security breaches](#) that lawmakers continue to amplify as they look to rein in TikTok.

Rep. Ro Khanna, D-Calif., whose district is in the heart of Silicon Valley, said he is mindful of the value that platforms like TikTok provide to young people as an outlet for creative expression and building community. "But there's absolutely no reason that an American technology company can't do that," said Khanna, the top Democrat on the cyber subcommittee on House Armed Service. "America has the most innovative technology companies in the world."



Rep. Troy Nehls, R-Texas, arrives for an event to call for the banning of TikTok, the hugely popular video-sharing app, at the Capitol in Washington, Thursday, March 23, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite

He added that Congress should move forward with a proposal that would force platform's sale to an American company for continued access for its millions of users while "ensuring that the platform isn't subject to Chinese propaganda or compromises people's privacy."

According to a survey by the Pew Research Center, two-thirds of Americans aged 13 to 17 use TikTok, and 16% of all teens say they use it almost constantly. It's because of TikTok's large user base that Lindsay Gorman, a former tech adviser for the Biden administration who now works as a senior fellow for emerging technologies at the German Marshall Fund, says the Biden administration will likely pursue every option short of a ban first. That would include the option for the app's Chinese owners to divest, which the Biden administration is reportedly demanding from TikTok if it wants to avoid a nationwide ban.

TikTok itself has been trying to leverage its popularity. On Wednesday, [it sent dozens of influencers to Congress](#) to lobby against a ban. It has also ramped up a broader public relations campaign, plastering ads all over Washington that tout its promises of securing users' data and privacy and creating a safe platform for its young users.

Some popular TikTokers who speak out against a ban are concerned—and angered—about how it might impact their personal lives. Many earn income from their videos and have inked brand partnerships to market products to their audiences—another stream of

revenue that could be wiped away if the platform disappears. They would also lose the [social capital](#) that comes from having a large following on the trend-setting app.

Demetrius Fields, a standup comedian who amassed 2.8 million followers on TikTok from posting comedy sketches, said he spent a long time building his career and followership on the platform. He has one active deal with the fast fashion retailer Fashion Nova, which allows him to earn an income along with the videos he posts on TikTok.

If the app is taken away, he said building an audience on another platform would be challenging for him due to the competition to grab user attention.

"The financial implications for me would be pretty terrible," Fields said. "I would probably have to go back to working a desk job."

Sarah Pikhit, an 18-year-old student at Penn State University, said she used to use TikTok a lot, but started cutting back when she realized how much time she spent scrolling through videos on the app. She still uses it, but mostly to post her own content, which she says she can do on other platforms. She said she wouldn't care if TikTok gets banned—but her friends would.

"They like the excessive scrolling," Pikhit said.

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