

TikTok restricts tool used by researchers—and its critics—to assess content on its platform

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The icon for the video sharing TikTok app is seen on a smartphone, Feb. 28, 2023, in Marple Township, Pa. TikTok has restricted one tool researchers use to analyze popular videos, a move that follows a barrage of criticism directed at the social media platform about content related to the Israel-Hamas war and a study that questioned whether the company was suppressing topics that don't align with the interests of the Chinese government. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Slocum, File

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TikTok's Creative Center—which is available for anyone to use but is geared towards helping brands and advertisers see what's trending on the app—no longer allows users to search for specific hashtags, including innocuous ones.

The social media company, which is owned by Beijing-based ByteDance, has also removed certain hashtags from the Creative Center that some online researchers had stored for analysis. They include topics that would be seen as controversial to the Chinese government—such as "UyghurGenocide" and "TiananmenSquare"—as well as hashtags about U.S. politics and the war in Gaza and Ukraine. The Center will now only allow searches for the top 100 hashtags by industry, the company said.

"Unfortunately, some individuals and organizations have misused the Center's search function to draw inaccurate conclusions, so we are changing some of the features to ensure it is used for its intended purpose," TikTok spokesperson Alex Haurek said in a prepared statement.

The New York Times first reported on the changes, which came to light last week in an addendum to a study published in December by the Network Contagion Research Institute at Rutgers University.

In the study, researchers with the nonprofit had compared hashtags for certain geopolitical topics on Instagram and TikTok and concluded there

was a "strong possibility" TikTok content was being amplified or underrepresented based on how it aligns with the Chinese government's interests.

Haurek, the TikTok spokesperson, has disputed the report's findings, saying it uses flawed methodology and fails to take into account that hashtags are created by users, not the company. The study was also criticized in a blog posted earlier this month by the Cato Institute, a libertarian-leaning think tank based in Washington.

Overall, TikTok has said blunt comparisons of hashtags is a flawed way to analyze activity on the platform. But at the same time, the company has used hashtag comparisons to defend itself against accusations that content on the app was overwhelmingly biased against Israel during its war in Gaza.

TikTok says it enables academic researchers to study content through Research API, which allows third-parties to gather data about information on the platform. Researchers seeking that data need to submit an application to TikTok and get its approval.

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