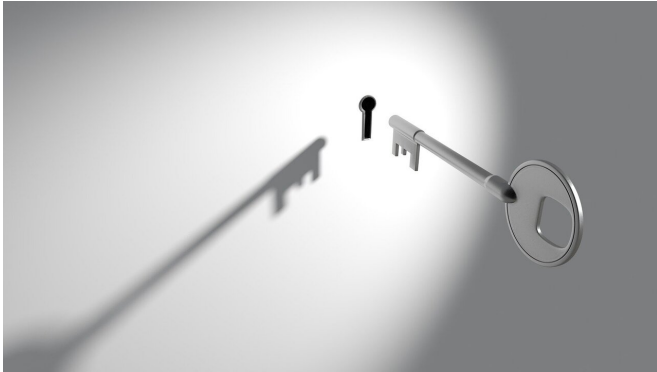


Another app with privacy concerns: TikTok, a popular video app with ties to China

19 July 2019, by N'dea Yancey-Bragg And Mike Snider, Usa Today



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The resurgence of St. Petersburg, Russia-based FaceApp has sparked renewed concerns about online privacy, and popular video app TikTok is also raising red flags among security experts.

TikTok, which is owned by Chinese tech giant ByteDance, crossed the 1 billion mark for worldwide installs on the Apple App Store and Google Play, according to data published in February 2019 by Sensor Tower, an analyst group that focuses on the mobile market.

But many users don't know it is owned by a Chinese firm, according to CNBC. Experts told the outlet this is an intentional strategy that many Chinese technology firms use as they break into U.S. markets.

"Overall, there is low awareness about the origin of these apps," Hanish Bhatia, senior analyst at Counterpoint Research, told CNBC in April. "So Chinese tech firms and apps are continuously making efforts to get rid of the Chinese tag. The idea is to position themselves as a global player."

In a statement to U.S. TODAY, a spokesperson

from TikTok reiterated that protecting user [privacy](#) is a critical priority for the company.

"As part of our overall commitment to transparency, we are working with an independent, US-based internet privacy firm to audit our practices and confirm that we are employing industry-leading standards for the storage and protection of TikTok user data," the statement read.

TikTok has come under fire for privacy problems before

In February 2019 the Federal Trade Commission alleged TikTok—which merged with the musical.ly app last year—illegally collected personal information from children.

TikTok agreed to pay \$5.7 million to settle the FTC's complaint, filed by the Department of Justice, which said the company violated the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act or COPPA. The act requires websites and online services to direct children under 13 to get parental consent before the company collects [personal information](#).

TikTok is also being investigated by the United Kingdom's Information Commissioner's Office to determine if it violated the European Union's data privacy law called GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation), which requires companies provide specific protections related to children and their data, The Guardian reported.

In a recent piece for Quartz, David Carroll, a professor of media design at The New School in Manhattan, highlighted a concerning section of TikTok's privacy policy which in late 2018 said that user data may be transferred to China. That section was revised after the company's settlement with the FTC.

He said TikTok confirmed his statement that "data from TikTok users who joined the service before

February 2019 may have been processed in China," recognizing Western faces, or at extracting intelligence on Western military activities," Biancotti wrote. but also offered a clarification of their current privacy policy:

"TikTok user data is stored and processed in the U.S. and other markets where TikTok operates at industry-leading third-party data centers. It's important to clarify that TikTok does not operate in China and that the government of the PRC has no access to TikTok users data. In the United States, TikTok is operated by our US entity. Data may be shared with others in our corporate group as defined in the Privacy Policy for the explained purposes. The privacy and security of our users is a top priority for TikTok, and we abide by local laws and regulations in the markets where we operate."

Certain countries, such as Russia and China, "have shown little regard for the privacy of people using technologies based there," said Gary Davis, chief consumer security evangelist for McAfee—a Santa Clara, Calif.-headquartered cloud cybersecurity company.

"It's always best to err on the side of caution with any personal data and think carefully about what you are uploading or sharing," he said. "A good security practice is to only share personal data, including personal photos, when it's truly necessary."

Why should I be concerned?

In its [privacy policy](#), TikTok says its "collects contact details, content you create, and your location," as well as "information contained in the messages you send through our Platform and information from your phone book, if you grant us access to your phone book on your mobile device."

Carroll said in a tweet that because FaceApp is based in Russia and TikTok is based in China, it's "safe to assume those governments can readily access your data."

Tech firms based outside of the U.S. are "subject to different standards or governance for data handling," Jason Hill, lead cybersecurity researcher at CyberInt, said. "Whilst many individuals may not be concerned by this, users working in government, military or sensitive roles may want to consider the ramifications of potentially exposing their personal data to foreign entities."

While the app's primary demographic is teenagers and young adults, a report from Claudia Biancotti at the Peterson Institute of International Economics noted that there is an active sub-community of young military service members.

"Social apps gather a lot of data on users; if this information is sent to China, it can be easily accessed by the government and leveraged, say, to make Beijing's surveillance software better at

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