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TikTok Demands Political Attention

George Burquest, Staff Reporter

A recent hearing regarding the Chinese-owned social media platform TikTok marks growing distrust among U.S. lawmakers and citizens concerning its data collection capabilities and alleged ties back to the Chinese Communist Party. The hearing on March 23 had TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew testifying before Congress, receiving a barrage of questions from lawmakers aligned with both political parties.

The U.S. is one of TikTok's most important markets with over 150 million users. Since its launch in 2018, TikTok has rapidly become a pervasive source of news and media, particularly among younger audiences (25% of TikTok users are under 20), who watch, engage with and post content on the app.

Zoe Marshall (@zoechristina), a 21-year-old content creator, has been posting on TikTok since before it was called TikTok. Musical.ly was another short-form video app that was launched in 2014. ByteDance acquired the app in 2017 and merged it into TikTok one year later. Marshall transitioned from posting on Musical.ly to TikTok and steadily grew a following. She now has 518.3k followers on the app.

Serving as a source of news, entertainment and profit through creator compensation, banning TikTok would have effects beyond a lull in trends and new dance moves. Marshall feels that banning TikTok would leave creators bereft of options for platforms.

"People make a living off of TikTok. It's not like you can just switch to another platform. The space which I and a lot of other content creators have created on TikTok is not replicable on Instagram, Twitter or Facebook," Marshall said.



Natalie Schorr

TikTok has not been the only social media platform to face federal inquiry. In April 2018 Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg was put before Congress' House Energy and Commerce Committee and questioned about Facebook's data collection capabilities. Zuckerberg's hearings notably lacked the same threat of banning that TikTok has faced. During recent hearings, the concern consistently reiterated the threat of the Chinese Communist Party and their potential access to the data of American citizens.

TikTok has already been banned on all government-issued phones and devices, as well as on the Wi-fi networks of several major public universities, including Texas A&M and the University of Florida.

Caitlin Carlson, associate professor and chair of the communication and media department at Seattle University, sees the issue of data privacy outside of TikTok.

"First and foremost, information warfare is a very real tool and something that lots of authoritarian governments are using," Carlson said. "TikTok is gathering the same kind of data that Facebook, Instagram or Twitter are gathering in terms of personal or location data, then selling it to third parties. We are focusing on them because it is easy to say 'Oh this is a Chinese company, they're up to no good.'"

According to Carlson, it would be more effective to work on data protection policies instead of banning any particular app, citing the General Data Protection Regulation, which is outlined in the European Union's law on data protection and privacy.

"[In the EU] people fundamentally own their data, while in the US, data is treated much more ambiguous," said Carlson.

Patrick Schoettmer, an associate professor of political science at Seattle U, noted that a number of politicians from both parties agree that action should be taken on restricting TikTok.

"I see a nationwide ban of TikTok as a possibility. It hits several sweet spots. It's hitting on a social media issue, which both parties are concerned about. It's a platform most [legislators] probably don't engage with, and if we look at polling numbers, banning TikTok is actually quite popular, with a recent poll coming back as 57% of Americans supporting the banning of TikTok," Schoettmer said.

This polling data is compounded by the fact that the younger demographic, who comprise a quarter of TikTok's user base, consistently demonstrate lower voter turnout than other Americans.

The passage of a European Union-style data protection policy is something that the U.S. is far away from, given the bipartisan support that would be required. TikTok, on the other hand, is low-hanging fruit for lawmakers, according to Schoettmer.

A ban won't happen tomorrow, though it could in the future. As data privacy policy continues to evolve, the relationship between the U.S. and China will continue to play an increasing role in TikTok's future.