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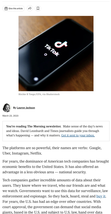
NEWSLETTER
The Morning

The Threat of TikTok

U.S. officials say TikTok is a national security risk. They're trying to turn it into their advantage.



Michael D. Sargent/EPA, via Shutterstock

By Natasha Jen/Jason
March 4, 2024

You're reading The Morning newsletter. Make some of the day's news and ideas. Daniel Gyllenhaal and Vinnie Jaiswal(an gender-gray of what's happening — and why it matters. Get it sent to your inbox.

The platform can be powerful, their names are verbs. Google, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram.

For years, the dominance of American tech companies has brought economic benefits to the United States. It has also offered an advantage in a less obvious area — national security.

Tech companies gather incredible amounts of data about their users. They know where we travel, who our friends are and what we watch. Governments want to use this data for surveillance, law enforcement and military uses. For years, the U.S. has had it. For years, the U.S. has had an edge over other countries. With court approval, the government can demand that social media companies based in the U.S. and subject to U.S. laws hand over user data.

"It's had this advantage that we thought would just go on forever," Bryan Schneier, a security expert and Harvard fellow, said.

Then TikTok came along. The social media app, owned by the Chinese company Byte Dance, has more than a billion users. TikTok says that includes about 150 million Americans. Under China's authoritarian state, the government has sweeping control over tech companies and their data. U.S. officials are worried that China can use TikTok to spy on Americans and gather their sensitive personal information. One Republican called it a "spy balloon in your phone."

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The concerns

This fight is ostensibly about data, who controls it and determines how it appears on TikTok. The U.S. has two main reasons for concern.

First is the threat of Chinese espionage. BuzzFeed found that Byte Dance employees in China had accessed American users' private data. Byte Dance also admitted that employees, including some based in China, had used TikTok to track journalists' locations, but said that company leaders had not signed off and that the employees were fired. Despite Byte Dance's close ties to China, TikTok has denied that it has given data to the government.

Second, Byte Dance could use TikTok's algorithm to influence what U.S. users see, for instance, instead of showing videos about politically sensitive subjects like China, like Tibetan independence and the Tiananmen Square massacre.

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"A Chinese company owns what has become America's number one social media platform," Senator Mark Warner, a Democrat and a leader who covers TikTok, said. In the future, lawmakers say, it's easy to imagine how China could use TikTok to shape American attitudes about Taiwan — or an American presidential campaign.

The U.S. is escalating efforts to limit TikTok's power. The federal government has prohibited its use on government devices. Many U.S. states, including Texas and Maryland, Arizona, Canada and Belgium have done the same. India banned the app entirely. Now the U.S. is threatening a nationwide ban, too.

How likely is a ban?

Donald Trump tried to ban TikTok in 2020, but judges rejected his attempt. The government is trying again, though it's unclear exactly how a ban would be implemented. There is no precedent for a ban on a popular app like TikTok.

One approach that some lawmakers prefer would remove TikTok from Apple's and Google's app stores and make the app nonfunctional in U.S. cellphone networks. But the government couldn't reach into users' phones to delete the app. TikTok would still be available on computers and tablets, and users with rooted Android phones to the app, which would probably render it unusable eventually.

Any ban faces legal and political hurdles, including questions about First Amendment protections and the possibility of angering millions of TikTok users heading into a presidential election year.

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The U.S. may be threatening a ban to force another outcome in its favor — the sale of TikTok to an American company. TikTok and the U.S. have previously negotiated about one. Still, the path is murky. Chinese leaders have said they would not let Byte Dance sell the crown jewel but the app, which could cost $50 billion, according to some analysts. A sale could also trigger antitrust concerns for probable sellers like Microsoft.

The power of a threat

Even if a ban never happens, the threat of one still matters. The U.S. government's pressure on TikTok has forced the company to commission a third law firm in China. Lawmakers in both parties will likely make that point clear in the hearing today.

The episode is the latest in the larger fight between more world powers competing for dominance. In this context, data is a valuable source of economic and political clout.

"If you can control data, you can have influence," Joseph Nye, a political scientist, said.

China has known this for years. The country has banned apps like Google and Facebook and has created its own versions of the Internet, isolating its citizens from the rest of the world. The U.S. is now threatening to use China's playbook against it, effectively leveraging private companies as a national asset and limiting information access as a form of sanctioning.

China, TikTok's chief executive, is expected to tell Congress today that the app is a vehicle for promoting soft power — a "love letter" to the world, a way to promote Chinese culture and culture? But the U.S. has made clear it cares more about the hard power of data.

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"TikTok is the first platform to truly compete with three huge American tech companies," Sapan said. "The signal the government is sending is: Don't bother."

For more

- "TikTok usher". Lawmakers are expected to describe TikTok as two addictive for children. Texas says it's unsafe to limit their time on the app.
- The app has deployed its famous creators to influence lawmakers before today's hearings.

THE LATEST NEWS

The Economy

- The Fed ramped interest rates by a quarter of a point, a middle ground that officials hope will tempt inflation without further harming banks.
- The banking turmoil could also help slow the rise in prices as banks lend less money, the Fed's chairman, Jerome Powell, said.
- Stocks rose on the news of the rate hike, but fell later in the day as investors fretted about banking.

Politics

- The Manhattan grand jury investigating Donald Trump did not meet yesterday, pushing back its decision on whether to indict him.
- In a separate case, about government documents at Mar-a-Lago, an appeals court referred Trump's lawyer to a jury over misrule.
- Michigan Democrats passed a bill to repeal a law that weakened unions, first Governor Whitmer is expected to sign it.
- A Chinese tech company based in Wyoming, at least temporarily, after a judge blocked the state's abortion law with further court proceedings.
- While residents of Jackson, Miss., boiled their water during a shortage, the city squandered five million gallons a day from a single broken pipe.

International

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Flooding victim in the Central Black. Vernon Yarnoun

- The power that drives Japan's hot springs could be a rich source of clean energy. But the springs' influential owners are blocking electricity projects.
- Xi Jinping's summit with Vladimir Putin institutized China and Russia's shared opposition to American dominance.
- Russia is increasingly treating Roma and gad time by people who criticize its war in Ukraine on social media.
- Uganda's Parliament passed a sweeping anti-gay law with punishments as severe as the death penalty.

Other Big Stories

- Surveillance video shows police officers in Virginia punching a man in a wheelchair and he went long hours before he died in a hospital, lawsuits say.
- A high-school student in Denver plan two school administrators and fled. The authorities said they had found the suspect's car and a body nearby.
- Parents struggling financially in Los Angeles say they underpaid why school workers are striking.

Opinions

Teaching the conservative intellectual tradition challenges liberal college students. Teaching the conservative ones something to ponder by mere **Ben Sasse**.

In a year the near financial crisis, give a representative of the American people a voice on Sunday Tuesday, says **Susie Gharavi**.

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MORNING READS

Wearing masks in the Central Black. Vernon Yarnoun

Sky-scraping economy. A writer, guided by an epic folk tale, tours the Himalayas.

Bucthwarts deals. People thought he was poisoned. A lack of fair defaulted that myth.

10-year-old terrorist. Mr. Pickles is a new deal of illness.

Adrien from Wirecutter. Cheap but lovely additions to your perch.

Lens Lovat. In the early 1960s, scientists didn't fully understand how cancer spreads in the body. A young Massachusetts Mechanic sought to find out, earning the unofficial title "the father of cannabis research." Mechanic died at 81.

SPORTS NEWS FROM THE ATHLETIC

A hit. The World Baseball Classic championship game was the tournament's most watched game ever in the U.S.

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One more year. North Carolina's Armando Bond will return to school for a fifth season of basketball.

Cancer diagnosis. Four-quest N.F.L. tight end Foster Moreau has Hodgkin's lymphoma that was discovered during a routine physical conducted by New Orleans Saints' medical team.

ARTS AND IDEAS

Netflix, Hollywood, Los Angeles

From Souls to screen

Alex Garland's miniseries "Shortsteppe" has grown into a sensation, first as a graphic novel series with three million copies sold, then as a video game. Now it's a television show. Its creator Garland has been intent on staying true to her original creation.

"It was really important to us to our vision to preserve the aesthetic of the camera and the tone of the comics," Norman told The Times. Using frames from the comic and clips from the show, she explained how she adapted them for screen.

Netflix via The New York Times

It's radiclick season. Use it for this Caesar salad.

Theater

"Hurricane" brings country music and crime pays, to Broadway.

What's on TV

"They're Watching Us," a documentary by Ava DuVernay, investigates the conflicts between student safety and privacy.

Late Night

The hosts are still standing Donald Trump's potential gaya walk.

New Time to Play

The pangram from yesterday's Spelling Bee was *fulgurp*. Here is today's puzzle.

Here's today's Mini Crossword, and a clue: Scale, as a rock wall (*Mini Crossword*).

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And here's today's Wordle.

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P.S. One of the Liberty cargo ships the U.S. lent to Britain during World War II was named for Adolph S. Ochs, The Times's former publisher.

Here's today's front page.

"The Daily" is about American cinema.

Matthew Cullen, Lauren Hard, Ian Prasad Philbrick, Tom Wright-Piersanti and Ashley Wu contributed to The Morning. You can reach the team at themorning@nytimes.com.

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