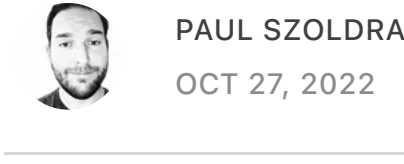


The TikTok national security threat

Don't worry, it's not your cringe dance videos

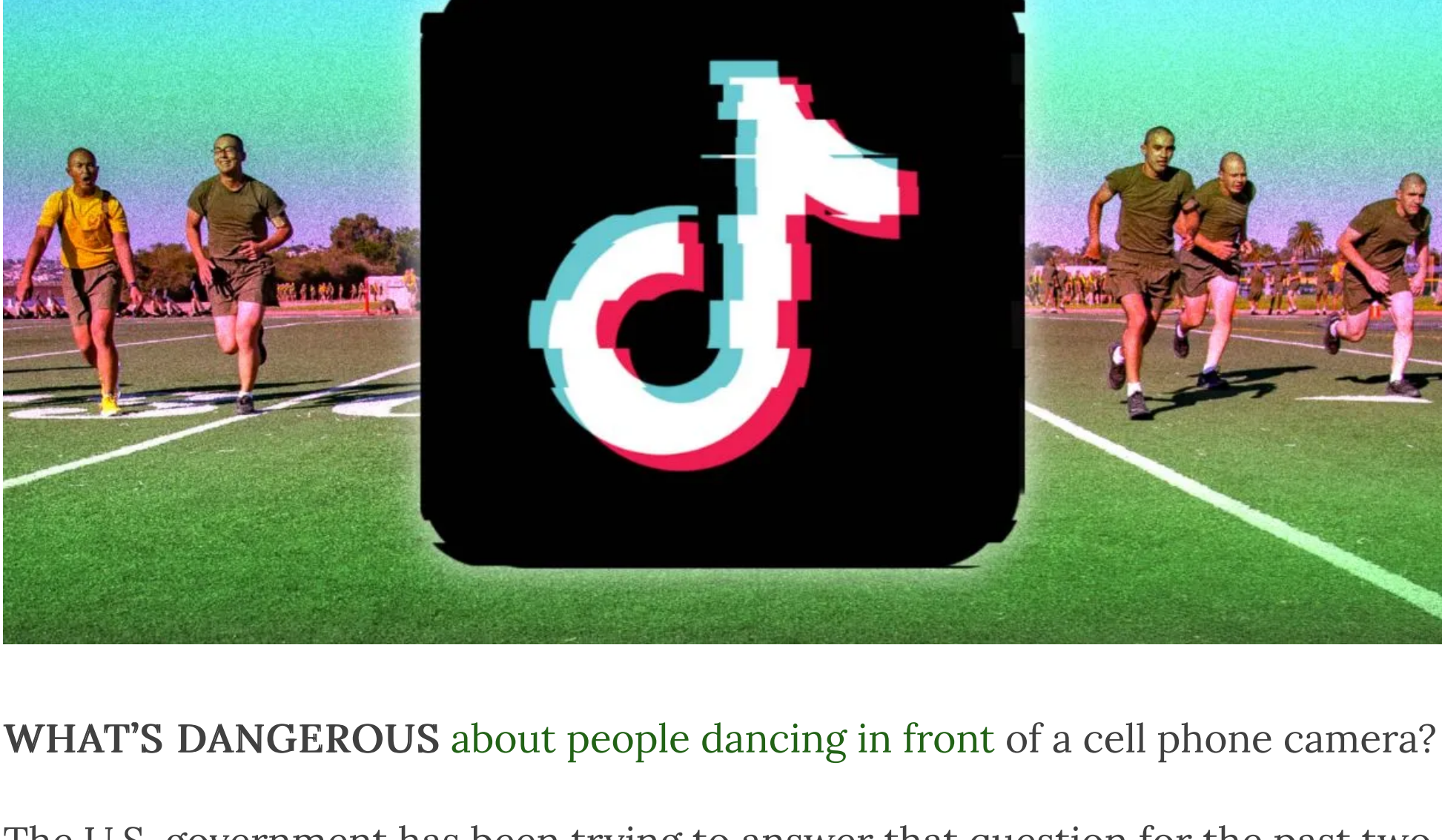


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WHAT'S DANGEROUS about people dancing in front of a cell phone camera?

The U.S. government has been trying to answer that question for the past two years with TikTok, a wildly addictive app used by many U.S. military service members and an estimated 135 million other Americans.

It's especially popular with young people, who increasingly use TikTok as a search engine. And a "small but growing share" of American adults say they regularly get their news there.

Owned by the Beijing firm ByteDance, TikTok has been under a U.S. security review since 2020, and President Joe Biden on Sept. 15 ordered "additional national security factors" to be considered.

Hannah Kelley, a research assistant for the technology and national security program at CNAS, says there's substantial debate among policymakers on the exact nature of the threat (or if there even is one). But "the potential is a really important part of the threat analysis."

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Indeed, considerable ink has been spilled on the potential uses of TikTok that sound terrifying alongside evidence-backed issues raised about the app over the years: In 2019, TikTok ordered moderators to censor videos that Beijing didn't like. In 2020, it collected unique identifiers on millions of users for more than a year to track online behavior without their consent—and in apparent violation of Google policies. In 2021, it began to automatically gather biometric data. And this year, an independent researcher found code allowing TikTok to log keystrokes, while others found that moderators failed to catch 90% of ads "featuring false and misleading messages about elections" on its platform.

"I think everything feels so drawn out and thorny because it's high stakes for all involved," Kelley said of the yearslong U.S. review, adding that whatever the Biden administration decides will likely be "a precedent-setting moment on tackling a new suite of emerging vulnerabilities." As she and others have pointed out, digital privacy, data rights, and security issues require thinking beyond a single app.

In response to critics, TikTok has made changes and insisted that its U.S. data is walled off from China. But audio leaked in June from 80 internal TikTok meetings showed it was clearly not.

A TikTok Trust and Safety team member said during a Sept. 2021 meeting, "everything is seen in China," according to the leaked audio. And that same month, a TikTok director said a Beijing-based engineer was a "master admin" who "has access to everything."

I find it difficult to trust any social media company, especially one with a Chinese government official on its board. As TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew confirmed to lawmakers in June (under U.S. employee oversight, he claimed), "employees outside the U.S., including China-based employees, can have access to TikTok U.S. user data."

And really, that's what we're talking about here: Not dance videos but data, a massive amount of it, is being sucked up by a Chinese app that the Pentagon is clearly worried about for obvious reasons: the U.S. military has killed people based on data.

"By itself, I don't think that the TikTok app on people's devices is a significant threat," says Jake Williams, a former NSA hacker, "but the potential for Chinese data collection across the platform is a larger concern, especially when combined with other data already acquired by Chinese state actors."

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The Rundown

- **The Justice Department accused seven Chinese men and women of conducting surveillance for Beijing and intimidating a Chinese national living in the United States.**
 - "The victims in this case sought to flee an authoritarian government, leaving behind their lives and family, for a better life here. That same government sent agents to the United States to harass, threaten, and forcibly return them to the People's Republic of China. The actions we allege are illegal, and the FBI will not allow adversaries to break laws designed to protect our nation and our freedom," said FBI Assistant Director-in-Charge Michael Driscoll.
 - It's a recent example of Beijing's threats to the Chinese diaspora worldwide, but it's not the only one.
 - In Norway this week, Dutch reporters uncovered evidence of Chinese police operating illegally in the Netherlands.
 - "He asked me to go back to China to solve my problems. He also told me to think about my parents," says Wang Jingyu, a dissident who claimed he was contacted by a Chinese police station in Rotterdam.
 - As Human Rights Watch reported in 2021, Chinese pro-democracy students going to school in Australia said it "weighed heavily" on their minds the thought of "authorities punishing or interrogating their parents back home," leading to self-censorship.
- **Meanwhile, two Chinese intelligence officers allegedly tried to steal documents related to the prosecution of Huawei by paying bribes to a U.S. government employee.** The employee, working as a double agent for the FBI, was paid tens of thousands of dollars in Bitcoin and gave the spies fake documents outlining prosecution strategy, witnesses, and confidential evidence.
- **Australia and Japan are teaming up to counter China with a landmark security cooperation deal to strengthen military ties and share intelligence.** "Together, we are accelerating each other's efforts to realize a stable, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific," said Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.
 - Here's the full joint agreement.
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin recently toured a training base for new soldiers and handled gear "few soldiers are actually" getting.** While the video makes for useful propaganda at home, Russian soldiers have been spotted in Ukraine with Soviet-era helmets and body armor.
 - Meanwhile, some conscripts are forced to buy their own military equipment and uniforms, while others are issued rusty rifles.
- **Ukraine continues its battle for Kherson, an important southern city that, if recaptured, would deal Putin a major blow and allow Kyiv to cut off the freshwater supply to Crimea.**
 - "Russian forces continued to establish fallback positions near the Dniipro River on Oct. 25," reads the latest assessment by the Institute for the Study of War. "The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are preparing defensive positions on the eastern bank of the Dniipro River and are mining the coastline near Hornostaivka, about 40km northeast of Nova Kakhovka."
 - "The Ukrainian General Staff added that Russian forces are leaving small passages for a potential retreat and are attempting to repair destroyed pontoon crossings. Russian milbloggers claimed that the Russian military command has not decided on the fate of Kherson City, given the ongoing situation in Kherson Oblast. Other milbloggers argued that Russian forces will be unable to hold Kherson City and that the Russian government can prevent a 'Battle of Stalingrad' by fully withdrawing to the eastern bank of the Dniipro River."
- **Russia accused the West of supplying Ukraine with advanced weapons that are ending up on the black market.** It's worth noting that Moscow is one of Ukraine's main weapons suppliers (sorry, I can't help myself).
 - So far, Russia is down 1,400+ tanks, 600+ armored fighting vehicles, 1,600+ infantry fighting vehicles, 250+ armored personnel carriers, and hundreds of command posts and communications stations, according to Oryx, which has been tracking equipment losses since February via photo and video evidence.
- **The White House says Russian pilots are flying Iranian-made 'suicide drones' from Crimea with training provided by a "small number" of Iranians.** "We are concerned that Russia may also seek to acquire advanced conventional weapons from Iran such as surface-to-surface missiles that will almost certainly be used to support the war against Ukraine," says NSC spokesman John Kirby.
- **Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro has posthumously promoted fallen Navy SEAL Brian Bourgeois to captain.** The former SEAL Team 8 commander died on Dec. 7, 2021, during a fast rope training exercise in Virginia Beach.
 - "An early release of the rope" and communication issues between aircrew and ground forces led to his death, Navy Times reported, noting that an official investigation is complete and undergoing final review.
 - Bourgeois, known by his teammates as "Booj," left behind a wife and five children whom he "never missed an opportunity to talk about," according to his obituary.
- **Access to cheap, easy-to-use drones has "almost democratized use of the air and aerial surveillance"** in war, says Maj. Gen. James Martin, commander of the UK's Warfighting Division.
 - "We don't assume we have control of air space anymore. We don't assume we have air superiority or supremacy as we have done in the Middle East."
 - "We now assume that we will have limited windows of opportunities to do what we want to do. That's the difference between fighting a peer adversary vs fighting a counter-insurgency."
 - "In Iraq and Afghanistan, we didn't have to worry about this stuff because our opponents didn't have the ability to do anything about it; he now does."
- **An Afghan couple says a Marine major abducted their baby** in a case that has attracted the attention of the Justice Department, Pentagon, and State Department. AP reports:

The baby had been rescued two years earlier from the rubble of a U.S. military raid that killed her parents and five siblings. After months in a U.S. military hospital, she had gone to live with her cousin and his wife, this newlywed couple. Now, the family was bound for the United States for further medical treatment, with the aid of U.S. Marine Corps attorney Joshua Mast.

When the exhausted Afghans arrived at the airport in Washington, D.C., in late August 2021, Mast pulled them out of the international arrivals line and led them to an inspecting officer, according to a lawsuit they filed last month. They were surprised when Mast presented an Afghan passport for the child, the couple said. But it was the last name printed on the document that stopped them cold: Mast.

They didn't know it, but they would soon lose their baby.

- It's a long, complicated, wild story worth reading. Check it out here.

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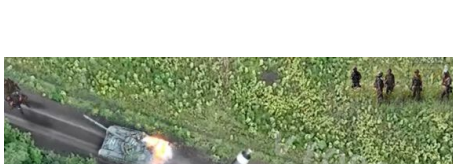
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