

TikTok: Friend or Foe?

Individuals and government alike worry about TikTok's foreign ownership.

By Michael A. Kashmer / *Digital Broadband Programming Consultant*

TikTok, the short-form mobile video app, arrived on U.S. shores in 2017 but only recently became a cultural force. It's now recognized as one of the fastest-growing social media platforms – the app's quirky, funny, 15-second videos have captivated the minds and imaginations of kids and teens, and there's no sign its popularity will abate anytime soon.

As of November, TikTok had been downloaded more than 750 million times in just the previous 12 months, compared with 715 million for Facebook, 450 million for Instagram, 300 million for YouTube and 275 million for Snapchat, according to research from Sensor Tower reported in the *New York Times*. SoftBank, a savvy technology and content investor, recently put a \$75 billion value on the social media marvel.

But the app's ascendance has not come without controversy. Silicon Valley and U.S. lawmakers worry, for a variety of reasons. Li Yuan, author of *The New New World* column in the *Times*, sums it up: "The rise of a seemingly innocuous app is forcing Americans to consider a world influenced by a Chinese-backed social media network." Here's a look at what's happening.

WHY SO POPULAR?

It's hard to describe TikTok. To understand its appeal, you just need to get sucked into a feed of the sometimes bizarre, often beguiling videos. I found the platform gave me sensory overload; my grandson, Luca, called it "stupidly annoying." But we're clearly in the minority.

Several *Times* critics found the app mesmerizing. One wrote that TikTok has built an entire world on the premise that people now take entertainment in microdoses. The app is "a vast global collection of 15-second clips that are changing the way we sing, dance, pose, joke, dress, collaborate and cook. It is home to comedy sketches, dance challenges, makeshift runway shows and short-short films," he wrote. "The most ambitious ones arrive as mini-epics, complete with soundtracks, visual effects and narrative arcs. ... It is not a 21-course meal. It's a bottomless gumball machine, serving up ephemeral treats."

Another critic said, "You look at TikTok and think the world is a musical. This celebration – of movement, of bodies, of dance – is addictive."

SILICON VALLEY TAKES AIM

Not everyone is enamored with TikTok. Silicon Valley giants dislike it because it's proving to be a strong competitor in the U.S. market and continues to dominate social media globally. Facebook, Google and YouTube are trying – and so far, failing – to crush the app.

Facebook launched a TikTok clone, Lasso, that the *Times* reports has been downloaded fewer than 500,000 times, mostly in Mexico. Facebook now reportedly is testing a new feature similar to TikTok, called Clips, that would enable users to cut together videos and add music.

Google, which owns YouTube, reportedly considered acquiring Firework, a TikTok clone targeting older users, but ultimately decided against the acquisition. YouTube also is pursuing ways to imitate TikTok's technology, according to the *Times*.

A NATIONAL SECURITY THREAT?

The fun and whimsy central to TikTok's appeal is a sharp contrast to dark allegations of censorship and questionable data-collection practices leveled against the app by U.S. lawmakers.

TikTok's owner, ByteDance, based in Beijing, has come under scrutiny by several U.S. lawmakers in recent months. In October, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) wrote a letter asking U.S. intelligence officials to assess whether TikTok is a threat to national security. The letter, addressed to the acting director of national intelligence, highlighted the congressmen's concerns about TikTok's data-collection practices.

TikTok officials claim U.S. users' data is stored in the United States, but the *Washington Post* reports that Schumer and Cotton worry that TikTok "is still required to adhere to the laws of China," which could "compel Chinese companies to

support and cooperate with intelligence work controlled by the Chinese Communist Party.”

Furthermore, the senators say, TikTok could be a “potential target of foreign influence campaigns like those carried out during the 2016 election on U.S.-based social media platforms.”

Schumer and Cotton are not the first U.S. lawmakers to ask that U.S. intelligence review TikTok’s practices. The Post reports that in early October, Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) asked the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States to investigate ByteDance’s 2017 acquisition of Musical.ly, an app that ByteDance turned into TikTok.

Rubio said the “Chinese government’s nefarious efforts to censor information inside free societies around the world cannot be accepted and pose serious long-term challenges to the U.S. and our allies.”

TIKTOK REBUTS CLAIMS

TikTok claims its U.S. operation doesn’t censor content or take direction from ByteDance and that moderators for TikTok’s U.S. platform are not based in China, The Post reports.

Former TikTok employees who worked in the company’s U.S. offices as recently as this spring said, however, that they were instructed to follow guidelines set by ByteDance’s headquarters in Beijing. They said they were instructed to demote and remove social and political content, including topics censored by the Chinese government.

The Post reports that Vanessa Pappas, TikTok’s U.S. general manager, said in a statement that content decisions “are not directed by any foreign government, including the Chinese government.” Acknowledging the former employees’ experiences, she said, “We initially took a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach and quickly realized that this wouldn’t work.” Pappas says TikTok’s

U.S. market is now managed by a team in California, “and the company understands they can best do so without executives 10,000 miles away involving themselves in their decisions.”

WHAT NEXT?

It remains to be seen what will decide TikTok’s fate in the United States. I think that anyone over the age of 20 will probably not understand the visual and overall entertainment value of TikTok, but that may be immaterial. TikTok’s popularity may continue to rise or may plunge from competition and/or government penalties. Time will tell. A total ban is unlikely but a hefty fine and content restrictions may be a start. ❖

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