

TikTok's Growing Disinformation Problem Compounded By Looming Influence Of China

Executive Summary

TikTok Exploded As Massive Market Force In Social Media

- TikTok, which launched in 2015, doubled its user base between the beginning of 2020 to September 2021 when it passed more than 1 billion active monthly users.
- TikTok users in the U.S. spend an average of 82 minutes per day on the platform.
- A June 2022 Reuters Institute report found that TikTok had emerged as a “significant new player in the news ecosystem.” A separate study found 33% of US-based TikTok users regularly got their news through the app in 2021, up from 22% in 2020.
- An internal TikTok document indicated that the platform’s “ultimate goal” of adding daily active users could be achieved by optimizing users’ “retention” and “time spent” metrics. One medical expert described the app as a “dopamine machine” while a social media analyst observed, “The algorithm tries to get people addicted rather than giving them what they really want.”
- Social media competitors are increasingly copying TikTok’s model, with Meta’s Instagram Reels and Facebook Discovery Engine and YouTube’s Shorts products all launching in recent years.

TikTok's Role In Spreading Disinformation And The App's Widespread Data & Privacy Problems

- TikTok is inundated with misinformation, with a recent study by NewsGuard finding that nearly 20% of videos provided in its search results on major news topics contained false or misleading claims.
- A disinformation expert with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue observed that TikTok offered a “very permissible space” for bad actors to spread viral disinformation.
- TikTok has become a powerful tool for state disinformation. Recent examples include:
 - The platform was “instrumental in the spread of misinformation” during the 2022 Philippine presidential election in rewriting the history of the Marcos regime and electing Ferdinand Marcos’ son.
 - TikTok was widely used to spread disinformation in the 2022 Kenyan presidential election, including the dissemination of an altered image of a candidate holding a knife to his neck while wearing blood-soaked clothes with a caption declaring him a murderer which was viewed more than 500K times before being removed.

- The Russian invasion of Ukraine “supersized the issues facing TikTok” with misinformation running rampant across the platform including Russian influencers paid to spread pro-Kremlin propaganda.
- The problem is compounded by TikTok’s unwillingness to provide transparency:
 - The New York Times reported, “Researchers said that misinformation would continue to thrive on TikTok as long as the platform refused to release data about the origins of its videos or share insight into its algorithms.”
 - The director of the NYU Center for Social Media and Politics said, “The consensus is that it’s a five-alarm fire ... We don’t have a good understanding of what’s going on there.”
- The concerns over disinformation spread add to the company’s widely reported data collection and privacy issues.
- A cybersecurity firm review of the app found that TikTok’s data collection practices were “overly intrusive” and suggested that the only reason this information has been gathered is for data harvesting.”
- In June 2022, BuzzFeed reported on internal TikTok meeting audio that revealed China-based employees of ByteDance repeatedly – and as recently as January 2022 – accessed U.S. TikTok user data despite the company’s assurances about storing U.S. user data domestically.
 - During a September 2022 Senate hearing, the COO of TikTok refused to commit to cutting the flow of U.S. user data to China.
- TikTok’s in-app browser includes code that allows monitoring of keystrokes and user clicks, making it possible for the app to capture sensitive information like passwords and credit card numbers.
 - A software researcher observed, “This is a non-trivial engineering task. This does not happen by mistake or randomly.”

Chinese Ownership Of TikTok Poses Unique Difficulties For U.S. Regulators In Stopping Disinformation And Protecting National Security

- TikTok’s owner, ByteDance, maintains close control of the company with former employees confirming that “boundaries between TikTok and ByteDance were so blurry as to be almost non-existent.”
- An August 2022 review found 300 TikTok and ByteDance employees who previously worked for Chinese state media outlets, including 15 that appeared to be employed concurrently at both.
- ByteDance owns two of the most popular apps in China, Douyin and Toutiao which comply with strict Chinese censorship laws. Chinese state media accounts are among the most popular on Douyin with millions of followers.

- Former ByteDance employees alleged the company instructed staff to push pro-China content on its now-defunct English language news app, TopBuzz. At its height, TopBuzz had 40 million monthly users in 2018.
- In a September 2022 Senate hearing, the TikTok COO “avoided saying whether ByteDance would keep US user data from the Chinese government or whether ByteDance may be influenced by China.”
- ByteDance, as a Chinese company, is required to follow Chinese law which has no process for appealing or protesting requests for data.
- ByteDance’s continued ownership of TikTok has raised concerns that the government could compel data espionage or engage in the “soft power” of strategic algorithm manipulation.
- The director of the Cybersecurity Policy & Research Institute observed that “as long as TikTok is a subsidiary of ByteDance, I certainly will not be satisfied with any purported technological fixes.”
- There are multiple reports that TikTok itself has engaged in pro-China content moderation:
 - In 2019, The Guardian reported on leaked TikTok content moderation documents instructing censorship of videos mentioning Tiananmen Square, Tibetan independence and Falun Gong.
 - In 2020, the Intercept reported on leaked TikTok livestream moderation guidelines that instructed censorship for content that harmed “national honor” or broadcast content about “state organs such as police.”
 - In 2019, TikTok appeared to censor content on pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong.
- The Chinese government has an extensive history of using social media for disinformation campaigns, including promoting pro-Russian disinformation on its invasion of Ukraine, smearing protestors in Hong Kong and clamping down on reports of Uyghur human rights abuses perpetrated by the Chinese government.

TikTok Exploded As Massive Market Force In Social Media

TikTok Has Become A Dominant Force In Social Media & Increasingly Used As News Source

Headline: CBS News: “TikTok Tops Google As The Most Visited Website On The Internet.” [CBS News, [12/23/21](#)]

TikTok Doubled Its Monthly User Base From Beginning Of 2020 To September 2021, Reaching More Than 1 Billion Users. “TikTok has seen its user base increase dramatically over the last year and a half. At the beginning of 2020 the platform had just over 500 million users worldwide. According to the company, it crossed a billion monthly users in September.” [New York Times, [10/2/21](#)]

TikTok Users In The U.S. Spend An Average Of 82 Minutes A Day On The Platform. “TikTok had barely been introduced in the United States at the time of the 2018 midterm elections and was still largely considered an entertainment app for younger people during the 2020 presidential election. Today, its American user base spends an average of 82 minutes a day on the platform, three times more than on Snapchat or Twitter and twice as long as on Instagram or Facebook, according to a recent report from the app analytics firm Sensor Tower. TikTok is becoming increasingly important as a destination for political content, often produced by influencers.” [New York Times, [8/14/22](#)]

Two-Thirds Of 13-17 Year-Olds In The U.S. Use TikTok. “With more than one billion users, TikTok has become a prime engine for cultural phenomena, like the scores of young people who posted last month about dressing in suits to see the latest “Minions” movie. Today, 67 percent of 13- to 17-year-olds in the United States use the app, according to a report last week from the Pew Research Center.” [New York Times, [8/14/22](#)]

Headline: The Verge: “TikTok is the fastest growing source of news for adults in the UK, survey finds.” [The Verge, [7/21/22](#)]

Headline: BuzzFeed News: “I Don’t Google Anymore. I TikTok.” [Buzzfeed News, [6/7/22](#)]

Headline: TechCrunch: “33% of US TikTok users say they regularly get their news on the app, up from 22% in 2020.” [TechCrunch, [9/20/22](#)]

Reuters Institute Study Found 40% Of 18-24 Year-Olds Used TikTok, With 15% Using TikTok As A News Source. “TikTok has become the fastest growing network in this year’s survey, reaching 40% of 18–24s, with 15% using the platform for news.” [Reuters Institute Digital News Report, [June 2022](#)]

Reuters Institute Described TikTok As A “Significant New Player In The News Ecosystem.” “TikTok emerges as a significant new player in the news ecosystem. In our data, we find significant and rapidly growing usage of TikTok, especially in Africa, Asia, and Latin America as well as across Eastern Europe. Usage is mostly still with under 25s, but is extending into all age brackets in countries with higher levels of usage, such as Kenya, South Africa, Thailand, Indonesia, Brazil, and Peru.” [Reuters Institute Digital News Report, [June 2022](#)]

TikTok Elevates Most Addictive Features To Ensure Captive Audience & Young People Are Particularly Vulnerable

Headline: The Independent: “New study identifies ‘TikTok addiction’ and the symptoms that show users might have it.” [The Independent, [5/5/22](#)]

Headline: Wall Street Journal: “TikTok Brain Explained: Why Some Kids Seem Hooked on Social Video Feeds.” [Wall Street Journal, [4/2/22](#)]

Study Found Personalized Videos From Recommendation Engine In Douyin – ByteDance’s TikTok Equivalent In China – Activated The Reward Centers Of Users’ Brains And Activated Areas Of The Brain Involved in Addiction. “One of the few studies specifically examining TikTok-related effects on the brain focused on Douyin, the TikTok equivalent in China, made by the same Chinese parent company, ByteDance Ltd. It found that the personalized videos the app’s recommendation engine shows users activate the reward centers of the brain, as compared with the general-interest videos shown to new users. Brain scans of Chinese college students showed that areas involved in addiction were highly activated in those who watched personalized videos. It also found some people have trouble controlling when to stop watching. “We speculate that individuals with lower self-control ability have more difficulty shifting attention away from favorite video stimulation,” the researchers at China’s Zhejiang University wrote.” [Wall Street Journal, [4/2/22](#)]

Children And Young People Are Particularly Vulnerable To TikTok’s Short Content Format As Result Of Underdeveloped Prefrontal Cortexes, Which Directs Decision Making And Impulse Control And Guides Tasks That Require Prolonged Focus. “When kids do things that require prolonged focus, such as reading or solving math problems, they’re using directed attention. This function starts in the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for decision making and impulse control....Kids generally have a harder time doing this—and putting down their videogame controllers—because the prefrontal cortex isn’t fully developed until age 25. Dr. Manos said the ever-changing environment of TikTok doesn’t require sustained attention. “If kids’ brains become accustomed to constant changes, the brain finds it difficult to adapt to a nondigital activity where things don’t move quite as fast,” he said. ...“In the short-form snackable world, you’re getting quick hit after quick hit, and as soon as it’s over, you have to make a choice,” said Mass General’s Dr. Marci, who wrote the new book “Rewired: Protecting Your Brain in the Digital Age.” The more developed the prefrontal cortex, the better the choices.” [Wall Street Journal, [4/2/22](#)]

Medical Expert: “TikTok Is A Dopamine Machine.” ““TikTok is a dopamine machine,” said John Hutton, a pediatrician and director of the Reading & Literacy Discovery Center at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital. “If you want kids to pay attention, they need to practice paying attention.”” [Wall Street Journal, [4/2/22](#)]

TikTok Internal Document Indicated Platform’s “Ultimate Goal” Of Adding Daily Active Users By Optimizing Users’ “Retention” And “Time Spent” Metrics. “The document explains frankly that in the pursuit of the company’s “ultimate goal” of adding daily active users, it has chosen to optimize for two closely related metrics in the stream of videos it serves: “retention” — that is, whether a user comes back — and “time spent.” The app wants to keep you there as long as possible. The experience is sometimes described as an addiction, though it also recalls a frequent criticism of pop culture. The playwright David Mamet, writing scornfully in 1998 about “pseudoart,” observed that “people are drawn to summer movies because they are not satisfying, and so they offer opportunities to repeat the compulsion.”” [New York Times, [12/5/21](#)]

Headline: New York Times: “How TikTok Reads Your Mind.” [New York Times, [12/5/21](#)]

Social Media Analyst, On TikTok: “The Algorithm Tries To Get People Addicted Rather Than Giving Them What They Really Want.” “To analysts who believe algorithmic recommendations pose a social threat, the TikTok document confirms their

suspicious. “This system means that watch time is key. The algorithm tries to get people addicted rather than giving them what they really want,” said Guillaume Chaslot, the founder of Algo Transparency, a group based in Paris that has studied YouTube’s recommendation system and takes a dark view of the effect of the product on children, in particular. Mr. Chaslot reviewed the TikTok document at my request.” [New York Times, [12/5/21](#)]

TikTok’s Most Important Element Was Watch Time Of Individual Videos To Pinpoint “The Piece Of Content That You’re Vulnerable To, That Will Make You Click, That Will Make You Watch.” “While TikTok claims that it uses likes, comments, and shares as metrics to measure your engagement with specific content, the WSJ found that the most important element the app analyzed was the watch time on a video—whether you immediately clicked away, paused, or rewatched. The algorithm sees what you’re reacting to, and can quickly pinpoint “the piece of content that you’re vulnerable to, that will make you click, that will make you watch, but it doesn’t mean that you really like it and that it’s the content you enjoy the most,” data scientist Guillaume Chaslot told WSJ upon reviewing their experiment. As a user’s stream becomes more niche, they’re more likely to encounter harmful content that is less vetted by moderators, according to the WSJ. This becomes a concern as TikTok’s user base tends to skew younger than other social media platforms like Facebook or Youtube.” [Popular Science, [12/7/21](#)]

Competitors Are Increasingly Copying TikTok Characteristics

August 2020: Meta Rolled Out Instagram Reels In Direct Competition With TikTok’s Short Video Format. “If the news about TikTok, and the possibility that it might be sold to Microsoft, wasn’t interesting enough, on Wednesday Facebook released a direct competitor to the popular video sharing app called Instagram Reels. A new feature of Instagram that lets you record 15-second videos, set them to music, and share them as an Instagram Story, Reels can also be found in a special section of the Explore tab in the app. In almost every functional way, Reels is TikTok, but built into Instagram. If Facebook were to buy TikTok from its parent company ByteDance, and integrate it into Instagram as is, it would be this product.” [Inc, [8/6/20](#)]

Headline: Inc: “Instagram Reels Copies TikTok, and Is an Example of Everything Wrong With Facebook.” [Inc, [8/6/20](#)]

March 2021: YouTube Launched YouTube Shorts, A TikTok Clone, In The U.S. “YouTube Shorts, the company’s short-form answer to TikTok, is launching in beta in the United States starting today. The short video format has already been available for several months in India, but today marks its debut stateside (along with the addition of several new features). For the beta launch, YouTube Shorts will feature all the basics of any TikTok clone: a multi-segment camera that makes it easy for creators to quickly string together clips, a wide selection of music tracks (with catalogs from “over 250 labels and publishers”), and a robust-looking captioning tool, the last of which is debuting alongside the US launch. ...Like TikTok, users will be able to swipe through an endless, algorithmically generated feed of short videos, subscribe to their favorite creators, explore specific hashtags or sounds, and remix other videos’ audio tracks. Even the interface looks similar to TikTok’s player.” [The Verge, [3/18/21](#)]

Headline: Protocol: “YouTube Shorts is a TikTok clone. It’s also YouTube’s master plan.” [Protocol, [3/18/21](#)]

July 2022: Meta Announced Facebook Would Launch Bisected Feed That Promoted “Discovery Engine” Featuring Content Chosen By Meta Algorithms, Similar To TikTok’s Signature Product. “Meta Platforms Inc. Chief Executive Officer Mark Zuckerberg made an announcement on July 21 that was confusing and somewhat misleading. In a Facebook post, he said he was breaking the social network’s feed into two sections. Because users care so much about content from their friends and families, Zuckerberg said, those posts would get their own tab. But when users open the app, they won’t see that tab but the one featuring Facebook’s “discovery engine,” which features content chosen by Meta’s algorithms. It didn’t take much reading between the lines to see what Facebook was doing: copying TikTok, the video-sharing app that it increasingly sees as its main competitor. The friends-and-family stuff that Facebook has built its empire on is going to become less accessible as Meta experiments with showing users content from people they aren’t following. In theory, doing this could allow Facebook to refine its own version of TikTok’s famously effective algorithms for choosing content, helping it retain users.” [Bloomberg, [7/27/22](#)]

Headline: Bloomberg: “Facebook Bets Its Users Really Want a TikTok Clone.”
[Bloomberg, [7/27/22](#)]

TikTok’s Role In Spreading Disinformation And The App’s Widespread Data & Privacy Problems

TikTok Is Inundated With Misinformation And Is An Increasingly Powerful Tool In The Spread Of Disinformation

NewsGuard Research Found Nearly 20% Of Videos Provided In TikTok Search Results On Major News Topics Contained False Or Misleading Claims. “Researchers at NewsGuard, a journalism and technology tool that tracks online information, searched TikTok and Google this month for information on major news topics such as the 2020 presidential election, the Russia-Ukraine war and abortion to compare the misinformation delivered by their search engines. ... The researchers searched terms such as “mRNA vaccine” and “2022 election,” as well as controversial news topics like “Uvalde tx conspiracy.” They analyzed 540 TikTok results and found that 105 videos, or 19.4%, contained false or misleading claims, the report says.” [CNN, [9/18/22](#)]

Headline: CNN: “TikTok’s search engine repeatedly delivers misinformation to its majority-young user base, report says.” [CNN, [9/18/22](#)]

Headline: New York Times: “On TikTok, Election Misinformation Thrives Ahead of Midterms.” [New York Times, [8/14/22](#)]

Disinformation Expert Observed That TikTok Offered “Very Permissible Space” For Bad Actors To Spread Viral Disinformation Content. “TikTok’s filters, effects, and sounds have made creating viral and compelling content easier. While those tools can be used to make videos that are completely innocuous, they could also be weaponized by bad actors. “For creating misleading or false information and content, TikTok offers a very permissible space,” Ciaran O’Connor, an analyst at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue who monitors disinformation online, told Insider. “Often [these tools] are used on videos of dance trends or cooking videos, but also they’re used by disinformation practitioners to create content that is eye-catching.”” [Business Insider, [5/8/22](#)]

TikTok Was “Instrumental In The Spread Of Misinformation” In 2022 Philippine Presidential Election In Rewriting History On The Marcos Name. “The platform was recently named as being instrumental in the spread of misinformation in the run-up to last month’s presidential election in the Philippines, with Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., the son of dictator Ferdinand Marcos, securing a landslide victory after a successful campaign that essentially rewrote history and glamorized the Marcos name on TikTok.” [Buzzfeed News, [6/7/22](#)]

Headline: Business Insider: “The spread of misinformation on TikTok may have impacted the Philippines’ presidential election — and researchers are keen to learn what that might mean for democracies around the world.” [Business Insider, [5/8/22](#)]

Headline: Los Angeles Times: “Dictator’s son uses TikTok to lead in Philippine election and rewrite his family’s past.” [Los Angeles Times, [5/5/22](#)]

Mozilla Foundation Researcher: TikTok Is “Failing Its First Real Test” In Africa By Failing To Rein In Disinformation Ahead Of Kenyan Presidential Election. “TikTok has been “failing its first real test” in Africa in recent weeks, Odanga Madung, a researcher for the nonprofit Mozilla Foundation, wrote in a report. The app struggled to tamp down on disinformation ahead of last week’s presidential election in Kenya. Mr. Madung cited a post on TikTok that included an altered image of one candidate holding a knife to his neck and wearing a blood-streaked shirt, with a caption that described him as a murderer. The post garnered more than half a million views before it was removed. “Rather than learn from the mistakes of more established platforms like Facebook and Twitter,” Mr. Madung wrote, “TikTok is following in their footsteps.”” [New York Times, [8/14/22](#)]

Headline: Gizmodo: “Political Disinformation Is All Over Kenyan TikTok.” [Gizmodo, [6/8/22](#)]

Headline: TechCrunch: “TikTok found to fuel disinformation, political tension in Kenya ahead of elections.” [TechCrunch, [6/7/22](#)]

New York Times: Russian Invasion Of Ukraine “Supersized The Issues Facing TikTok” With Misinformation Running Rampant Across The Platform. “But the war in Ukraine has supersized the issues facing TikTok, which has over one billion users globally....The very features that TikTok designed to help people share and record their own content have also made it easy to spread unverified videos across its platform. That includes TikTok’s algorithm for its “For You” page, which suggests videos based on what people have previously seen, liked or shared. Viewing one video with misinformation likely leads to more videos with misinformation being shown, Ms. Richards said. Another popular TikTok feature lets people easily reuse audio, which has enabled people to create lip-syncing scenes of popular movies or songs. But audio can be misused and taken out of context, Ms. Richards said. Over the last week, audio from a 2020 explosion in Beirut, Lebanon, was uploaded to several TikTok videos that claimed to show present-day Ukraine, according to The Times’s review. In another instance, a soundtrack of gunfire that was uploaded to TikTok on Feb. 1 — before Russia’s invasion — was later used in over 1,700 videos, many of which purported to be from the fighting in Ukraine, Ms. Richards said.” [New York Times, [3/5/22](#)]

Headline: NPR: “TikTok sees a surge of misleading videos that claim to show the invasion of Ukraine.” [NPR, [2/28/22](#)]

Headline: New York Times: “TikTok Is Gripped by the Violence and Misinformation of Ukraine War.” [New York Times, [3/5/22](#)]

Headline: Media Matters: “TikTok is facilitating the spread of misinformation surrounding the Russian invasion of Ukraine.” [Media Matters, [2/25/22](#)]

Headline: VICE: “Russian TikTok Influencers Are Being Paid to Spread Kremlin Propaganda.” [VICE, [3/11/22](#)]

TikTok’s Unwillingness To Provide Transparency On Data, Algorithms Is A Major Roadblock To Stopping Spread Of Misinformation

New York Times: “Researchers Said That Misinformation Would Continue To Thrive On Tiktok As Long As The Platform Refused To Release Data About The Origins Of Its Videos Or Share Insight Into Its Algorithms.” “Researchers said that misinformation would continue to thrive on TikTok as long as the platform refused to release data about the origins of its videos or share insight into its algorithms. Last month, TikTok said it would offer some access to a version of its application programming interface, or A.P.I., this year, but it would not say whether it would do so before the midterms.” [New York Times, [8/14/22](#)]

Wired: TikTok Has “Not Provided Tools To Enable Researchers To Study How Content Circulates On Its Platform, As Facebook And Twitter Have Done.” “To date, TikTok has been less transparent and less thoroughly studied than Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. That’s partly because it is a much younger service, and fewer researchers and journalists have scrutinized its workings. But TikTok has also not provided tools to enable researchers to study how content circulates on its platform, as Facebook and Twitter have done.” [Wired, [5/4/22](#)]

Director Of NYU Center For Social Media And Politics, On TikTok’s Lack Of Transparency: “The Consensus Is That It’s A Five-Alarm Fire. ... We Don’t Have A Good Understanding Of What’s Going On There.” “Disinformation watchdogs have criticized the company for a lack of transparency over the origins of its videos and the effectiveness of its moderation practices. Experts have called for more tools to analyze the platform and its content — the kind of access that other companies provide. “The consensus is that it’s a five-alarm fire,” said Zeve Sanderson, the founding executive director at New York University’s Center for Social Media and Politics. “We don’t have a good understanding of what’s going on there,” he added.” [New York Times, [8/23/22](#)]

Social Media Researcher Described TikTok As “Completely Opaque, And We Cannot Independently Assess Anything.” “Filippo Menczer, an informatics and computer science professor and the director of the Observatory on Social Media at Indiana University, said he had proposed research collaborations to TikTok and had been told, “Absolutely not.” “At least with Facebook and Twitter, there is some level of transparency, but, in the case of TikTok, we have no clue,” he said. “Without resources, without being able to access data, we don’t know who gets suspended, what content gets taken down, whether they act on reports or what the criteria are. It’s completely opaque, and we cannot independently assess anything.” [New York Times, [8/14/22](#)]

TikTok Has Well-Known, Massive Data Collection & Privacy Problems – Including Access To Nonpublic U.S. User Data By China-Based ByteDance Employees

Headline: CNBC: “TikTok shares your data more than any other social media app — and it’s unclear where it goes, study says.” [CNBC, [2/8/22](#)]

Headline: The Guardian: “TikTok has been accused of ‘aggressive’ data harvesting. Is your information at risk?” [The Guardian, [7/19/22](#)]

Cybersecurity Firm Review Of TikTok Found Data Collection Practices That Were “Overly Intrusive” And Suggested “The Only Reason This Information Has Been Gathered Is For Data Harvesting.” ““When the app is in use, it has significantly more permissions than it really needs,” said Robert Potter, co-CEO of Internet 2.0 and one of the editors of the report. “It grants those permissions by default. When a user doesn’t give it permission ... [TikTok] persistently asks. “If you tell Facebook you don’t want to share something, it won’t ask you again. TikTok is much more aggressive.” The report labelled the app’s data collection practices “overly intrusive” and questioned their purpose. “The application can and will run successfully without any of this data being gathered. This leads us to believe that the only reason this information has been gathered is for data harvesting,” it concluded.” [The Guardian, [7/19/22](#)]

Internal TikTok Meeting Audio Revealed China-Based ByteDance Employees Repeatedly Accessed Non-Public Data On U.S. TikTok Users Despite Company’s Assurances On U.S.-Based Data Storage. “For years, TikTok has responded to data privacy concerns by promising that information gathered about users in the United States is stored in the United States, rather than China, where ByteDance, the video platform’s parent company, is located. But according to leaked audio from more than 80 internal TikTok meetings, China-based employees of ByteDance have repeatedly accessed nonpublic data about US TikTok users — exactly the type of behavior that inspired former president Donald Trump to threaten to ban the app in the United States. The recordings, which were reviewed by BuzzFeed News, contain 14 statements from nine different TikTok employees indicating that engineers in China had access to US data between September 2021 and January 2022, at the very least. Despite a TikTok executive’s sworn testimony in an October 2021 Senate hearing that a “world-renowned, US-based security team” decides who gets access to this data, nine statements by eight different employees describe situations where US employees had to turn to their colleagues in China to determine how US user data was flowing. US staff did not have permission or knowledge of how to access the data on their own, according to the tapes.” [Buzzfeed News, [6/17/22](#)]

TikTok Employees Remarkd “Everything Is Seen In China” And Referred To Beijing-Based Engineer As The “Master Admin” Who “Has Access To Everything.” ““Everything is seen in China,” said a member of TikTok’s Trust and Safety department in a September 2021 meeting. In another September meeting, a director referred to one Beijing-based engineer as a “Master Admin” who “has access to everything.” (While many employees introduced themselves by name and title in the recordings, BuzzFeed News is not naming anyone to protect their privacy.)” [Buzzfeed News, [6/17/22](#)]

Headline: Buzzfeed News: “Leaked Audio From 80 Internal TikTok Meetings Shows That US User Data Has Been Repeatedly Accessed From China.” [Buzzfeed News, [6/17/22](#)]

Senate Intelligence Committee Called For FTC Investigation After Revelation U.S. User Data Was Accessible To ByteDance Employees In China. “The leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee asked the Federal Trade Commission on Tuesday to investigate

whether TikTok, the Chinese-owned video app, had misled the public about whether Beijing could have access to American user data. In a letter to Lina Khan, the chair of the F.T.C., Senator Mark Warner of Virginia, a Democrat who heads the Intelligence Committee, and Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, the panel's top Republican, said they were concerned about recent reports that TikTok's user data was accessible to employees of its parent company, ByteDance, in China. They also said they were worried that ByteDance was more involved in TikTok's decision making than the app had claimed in the past." [New York Times, [7/5/22](#)]

September 2022: During Senate Homeland Security Hearing, TikTok Refused To Commit To Cutting Off Flow Of U.S. Data To China. "TikTok repeatedly declined to commit to US lawmakers on Wednesday that the short-form video app will cut off flows of US user data to China, instead promising that the outcome of its negotiations with the US government "will satisfy all national security concerns." Testifying before the Senate Homeland Security Committee, TikTok Chief Operating Officer Vanessa Pappas first sparred with Sen. Rob Portman over details of TikTok's corporate structure before being confronted — twice — with a specific request. "Will TikTok commit to cutting off all data and data flows to China, China-based TikTok employees, ByteDance employees, or any other party in China that might have the capability to access information on US users?" Portman asked. ... Portman then pressed Pappas again to commit to "cutting off all data and metadata flows to China," but Pappas simply vowed that "our final agreement with the US government will satisfy all national security concerns." [CNN, [9/14/22](#)]

Headline: CNN: "TikTok won't commit to stopping US data flows to China." [CNN, [9/14/22](#)]

TikTok's In-App Browser Includes Code That Can Monitor Keystrokes, User Clicks On Websites, Making It Possible For TikTok To Capture Sensitive Information Like Credit Card Numbers And Passwords. "When TikTok users enter a website through a link on the app, TikTok inserts code that can monitor much of their activity on those outside websites, including their keystrokes and whatever they tap on the page, according to new research shared with Forbes. The tracking would make it possible for TikTok to capture a user's credit card information or password. TikTok has the ability to monitor that activity because of modifications it makes to websites using the company's in-app browser, which is part of the app itself. When people tap on TikTok ads or visit links on a creator's profile, the app doesn't open the page with normal browsers like Safari or Chrome. Instead it defaults to a TikTok-made in-app browser that can rewrite parts of web pages. TikTok can track this activity by injecting lines of the programming language JavaScript into the websites visited within the app, creating new commands that alert TikTok to what people are doing in those websites." [Forbes, [8/18/22](#)]

Headline: New York Times: "TikTok Browser Can Track Users' Keystrokes, According to New Research." [New York Times, [8/19/22](#)]

Software Researcher, On TikTok Inserting Tracking Browser Code: "This Is A Non-Trivial Engineering Task. This Does Not Happen By Mistake Or Randomly." "This was an active choice the company made," said Felix Krause, a software researcher based in Vienna, who published a report on his findings Thursday. "This is a non-trivial engineering task. This does not happen by mistake or randomly." Krause is the founder of Fastlane, a service for testing and deploying apps, which Google acquired five years ago." [Forbes, [8/18/22](#)]

TikTok Confirmed Browser Code Capture Capabilities, Claimed It Wasn't Using Them. "TikTok strongly pushed back at the idea that it is tracking users in its in-app browser. The company confirmed those features exist in the code, but said TikTok is not using them." [Forbes, [8/18/22](#)]

Chinese Ownership Of TikTok Poses Unique Difficulties For U.S. Regulators In Stopping Disinformation And Protecting National Security

TikTok Is Closely Controlled By China-Based ByteDance Which Maintains Ties To Chinese State

Former TikTok Employees Confirmed That "Boundaries Between TikTok And ByteDance Were So Blurry As To Be Almost Non-Existent." "The former employees who spoke to CNBC said the boundaries between TikTok and ByteDance were so blurry as to be almost non-existent. Most notably, one employee said that ByteDance employees are able to access U.S. user data. This was highlighted in a situation where an American employee working on TikTok needed to get a list of global users, including Americans, who searched for or interacted with a specific type of content — that means users who searched for a specific term or hashtag or liked a particular category of videos. This employee had to reach out to a data team in China in order to access that information. The data the employee received included users' specific IDs, and they could pull up whatever information TikTok had about those users. This type of situation was confirmed as a common occurrence by a second employee." [CNBC, [6/25/21](#)]

Headline: CNBC: "TikTok insiders say social media company is tightly controlled by Chinese parent ByteDance." [CNBC, [6/25/21](#)]

Forbes Review Found 300 TikTok & ByteDance Employees With Employment History At Chinese State Media Outlets, Including 15 That Appeared To Be Employed Concurrently. "Three hundred current employees at TikTok and its parent company ByteDance previously worked for Chinese state media publications, according to public employee LinkedIn profiles reviewed by Forbes. Twenty-three of these profiles appear to have been created by current ByteDance directors, who manage departments overseeing content partnerships, public affairs, corporate social responsibility and "media cooperation." Fifteen indicate that current ByteDance employees are also concurrently employed by Chinese state media entities, including Xinhua News Agency, China Radio International and China Central / China Global Television. (These organizations were among those designated by the State Department as "foreign government functionaries" in 2020.)" [Forbes, [8/10/22](#)]

Headline: Forbes: "LinkedIn Profiles Indicate 300 Current TikTok And ByteDance Employees Used To Work For Chinese State Media—And Some Still Do." [Forbes, [8/10/22](#)]

ByteDance Owns Two Of China's Most Popular Apps, Where Chinese State Media Entities Run Popular Accounts And The Apps Comply With Strict Chinese Censorship Laws. "The profiles also provide critical insight into how ByteDance manages its relationship with Chinese state media entities. In addition to TikTok, ByteDance runs numerous other websites and services, including two of mainland China's most popular apps: Douyin (a short form video app) and Toutiao (a news aggregator). Chinese state media entities are among the most popular accounts on Douyin, where they have many millions of followers. Many of the

LinkedIn profiles detail work on Toutiao and Douyin, which must comply with stringent Chinese censorship laws.” [Forbes, [8/10/22](#)]

Former ByteDance Employees Alleged ByteDance Instructed Staff To Push Pro-China Content On English-Language News App TopBuzz. “According to new claims by four former employees of the company, ByteDance already has used one of its apps to push pro-China messages to Americans: its now-defunct English-language news app, TopBuzz. ByteDance forcefully denies the claims. The four former ByteDance employees, each of whom worked on TopBuzz, claimed that ByteDance instructed members of its staff to place specific pieces of pro-China messaging in the app. According to three of the former employees, TopBuzz staff sometimes promoted content by “pinning” it to the top of the app. One former employee remembered staff posting panda videos in the app, along with videos promoting travel to China. Another remembered a staff member pinning a video in which a white man talked about the benefits of moving his startup to China.” [Buzzfeed News, [7/26/22](#)]

Headline: BuzzFeed News: “TikTok Owner ByteDance Used A News App On Millions Of Phones To Push Pro-China Messages, Ex-Employees Say.” [Buzzfeed News, [7/26/22](#)]

TopBuzz Launched In 2015 And Had 40 Million Monthly Active Users By 2018. “Launched in 2015, it amassed 40 million monthly active users by 2018 and was hailed as a major driver of traffic to US news publishers.” [Buzzfeed News, [7/26/22](#)]

ByteDance’s Actions With TopBuzz Raised Regulatory Concerns About Whether TikTok Could Be Used In Similar Fashion To Promote Chinese Propaganda. “But the allegation that ByteDance actively inserted pro-China messages into one of its apps raises another regulatory concern about TikTok: that ByteDance could use TikTok in a similar way to influence public discussion in the United States (or elsewhere) in order to benefit China’s authoritarian government. Adam Segal, director of the Digital and Cyberspace Policy Program at the Council on Foreign Relations, told BuzzFeed News that the allegations “certainly speak to the concerns that a Chinese app that is providing information could be misused for Chinese propaganda.” Still, he said he wasn’t entirely surprised: “This is how the company was used to operating in the Chinese market, and so they were just going to do the same thing in foreign markets.” [Buzzfeed News, [7/26/22](#)]

In September 2022 Senate Hearing, TikTok COO “Avoided Saying Whether ByteDance Would Keep US User Data From The Chinese Government Or Whether ByteDance May Be Influenced By China.” “Pappas affirmed in Wednesday’s hearing that the company has said, on record, that its Chinese employees do have access to US user data. She also reiterated that TikTok has said it would “under no circumstances ... give that data to China” and denied that TikTok is in any way influenced by China. However, she avoided saying whether ByteDance would keep US user data from the Chinese government or whether ByteDance may be influenced by China.” [CNN, [9/14/22](#)]

Skepticism That Chinese-Owned Platform Could Be Effectively Regulated For National Security & Disinformation Issues

As A Chinese Company, ByteDance Was Required To Comply With Chinese Law Which Had No Process For Appealing Or Protesting Requests For Data Collection. “TikTok is not

unique in collecting American user data. American consumer tech companies such as Facebook, Google and Twitter also possess vast troves of information they've collected on their users. The difference, according to experts on Sino-U.S. relations and Chinese espionage, is that American companies have many tools at their disposal to protect their users when the U.S. government seeks data, while Chinese companies have to comply with the Chinese government. "ByteDance is a Chinese company, and they're subject to Chinese national law, which says that whenever the government asks for the data a company is holding for whatever reason, the company must turn it over. They have no right to appeal," said Jim Lewis, senior vice president and director, strategic technologies program at the Center for Strategic & International Studies, a foreign affairs think tank. Lewis previously worked for various agencies in the U.S. government, including on Chinese espionage. "If the Chinese government wants to look at the data that ByteDance is collecting, they can do so, and no one can say anything about it," Lewis said." [CNBC, [6/25/21](#)]

Council On Foreign Relations Director: TikTok Faces Uphill Battle In Convincing U.S. Officials Its Algorithms Won't Be "Gamed For Chinese Interests." "Segal, the director at the Council on Foreign Relations, for his part, said TikTok will have an uphill battle in assuring American lawmakers that its algorithms will not be "gamed for Chinese interests." When asked what the company could do to regain regulators' trust, he said: "I just don't know how they can do it in this hybrid structure where ByteDance still has a significant say." [Buzzfeed News, [7/26/22](#)]

ByteDance's Ownership Of TikTok Raised Concerns That Government Could Compel Data Espionage Or Engage In "Soft Power" Of Strategic Algorithm Manipulation.

"Lawmakers' fear that the Chinese government will be able to get its hands on American data through ByteDance is rooted in the reality that Chinese companies are subject to the whims of the authoritarian Chinese Communist Party, which has been cracking down on its homegrown tech giants over the last year. The risk is that the government could force ByteDance to collect and turn over information as a form of "data espionage." There is, however, another concern: that the soft power of the Chinese government could impact how ByteDance executives direct their American counterparts to adjust the levers of TikTok's powerful "For You" algorithm, which recommends videos to its more than 1 billion users. Sen. Ted Cruz, for instance, has called TikTok "a Trojan horse the Chinese Communist Party can use to influence what Americans see, hear, and ultimately think." [Buzzfeed News, [6/17/22](#)]

Director Of Cybersecurity Policy & Research Institute: "As Long As TikTok Is A Subsidiary Of ByteDance, I Certainly Will Not Be Satisfied With Any Purported Technological Fixes." "But one cybersecurity expert said it could expose users to information requests by the Chinese government. "If the legal authorities in China or their parent company demands the data, users have already given them the legal right to turn it over," said Bryan Cunningham, executive director of the Cybersecurity Policy & Research Institute at the University of California, Irvine. ... "As long as TikTok is a subsidiary of ByteDance, I certainly will not be satisfied with any purported technological fixes," Cunningham said." [CNBC, [6/25/21](#)]

Physical Storage Of Data In U.S. Only Mitigated Some Risk And Didn't Address Access By China-Based Employees Of ByteDance.

"TikTok has said in blog posts and public statements that it physically stores all data about its US users in the US, with backups in Singapore. This does mitigate some risks — the company says this data is not subject to Chinese law — but it does not address the fact that China-based employees can access the data, experts say. "Physical location does not matter if the data can still be accessed from China," Adam Segal, director of the Digital and Cyberspace Policy Program at the Council on

Foreign Relations, told BuzzFeed News in an email. He said the “concern would be that data would still end up in the hands of Chinese intelligence if people in China were still accessing.” [Buzzfeed News, [6/17/22](#)]

TikTok’s “Project Texas” To Store U.S. User Data Domestically And Make It Inaccessible Outside The U.S. Would Only Protect Certain Nonpublic Data – ByteDance Would Still Have Access To Vast Information On U.S. User Preferences To Inform Algorithm.

“TikTok’s goal for Project Texas is that any data stored on the Oracle server will be secure and not accessible from China or elsewhere globally. However, according to seven recordings between September 2021 and January 2022, the lawyer leading TikTok’s negotiations with CFIUS and others clarify that this only includes data that is not publicly available on the app, like content that is in draft form, set to private, or information like users’ phone numbers and birthdays that is collected but not visible on their profiles. ... As TikTok continues to negotiate over what data will be considered protected, the recordings make clear that a lot of US user data — including public videos, bios, and comments — will not be exclusively stored in the Oracle server. Instead, this data will be stored in the company’s Virginia data center, which may remain accessible from ByteDance’s Beijing offices even once Project Texas is complete. That means ByteDance’s China-based employees could continue to have access to insights about what American TikTok users are interested in, from cat videos to political beliefs.” [Buzzfeed News, [6/17/22](#)]

FCC Commissioner Brendan Carr Warned ByteDance Was “Required By Law To Comply With Surveillance Demands” By The Chinese Government And Called On Apple And Google To Ban The App From Their Stores. “Brendan Carr, senior Republican on the Federal Communications Commission, leveled serious criticism at the popular social media platform. In a June tweet, he described ByteDance as “beholden” to the Chinese government and “required by law to comply with surveillance demands.” He later called on Apple and Google to remove TikTok from their app stores, although regulating social media platforms is not under his agency’s jurisdiction. “TikTok is not just another video app,” Carr wrote. “That’s the sheep’s clothing.” [Newsweek, [9/12/22](#)]

TikTok Has Already Had Multiple Instances Of Content Moderation That Appeared To Align With Chinese State Priorities & Policies

2019: TikTok Moderation Guidelines Censored Content That Ran Afoul Of Chinese State Policy, Including Content That Mentioned Tiananmen Square, Tibetan Independence, Falun Gong. “TikTok, the popular Chinese-owned social network, instructs its moderators to censor videos that mention Tiananmen Square, Tibetan independence, or the banned religious group Falun Gong, according to leaked documents detailing the site’s moderation guidelines. The documents, revealed by the Guardian for the first time, lay out how ByteDance, the Beijing-headquartered technology company that owns TikTok, is advancing Chinese foreign policy aims abroad through the app. ... The guidelines divide banned material into two categories: some content is marked as a “violation”, which sees it deleted from the site entirely, and can lead to a user being banned from the service. But lesser infringements are marked as “visible to self”, which leaves the content up but limits its distribution through TikTok’s algorithmically-curated feed.” [The Guardian, [9/25/19](#)]

Headline: The Guardian: “Revealed: how TikTok censors videos that do not please Beijing.” [The Guardian, [9/25/19](#)]

TikTok Moderation Guide Instructed Censorship Of Livestreams That Harmed “National Honor” Or Broadcast Content About “State Organs Such As Police.” “The makers of TikTok, the Chinese video-sharing app with hundreds of millions of users around the world, instructed moderators to suppress posts created by users deemed too ugly, poor, or disabled for the platform, according to internal documents obtained by The Intercept. These same documents show moderators were also told to censor political speech in TikTok livestreams, punishing those who harmed “national honor” or broadcast streams about “state organs such as police” with bans from the platform. These previously unreported Chinese policy documents, along with conversations with multiple sources directly familiar with TikTok’s censorship activities, provide new details about the company’s efforts to enforce rigid constraints across its reported 800 million or so monthly users while it simultaneously attempts to bolster its image as a global paragon of self-expression and anything-goes creativity. They also show how TikTok controls content on its platform to achieve rapid growth in the mold of a Silicon Valley startup while simultaneously discouraging political dissent with the sort of heavy hand regularly seen in its home country of China.” [The Intercept, [3/16/20](#)]

Content Moderation Guide On Livestreams Appeared To Have Originated In China. “The content moderation documents obtained by The Intercept Brasil and The Intercept contain indications that standards enforced on TikTok livestreams originate in China. One document, while in English, contains clunky phrasing suggestive of machine translation, as well as references to a Chinese language font embedded in the file itself, while the second contains large portions of both Chinese and English text.” [The Intercept, [3/16/20](#)]

TikTok Appeared To Be Censoring Pro-Democracy Protests In Hong Kong In Search Results. “A search for “#hongkong” on Twitter reveals a vast visual patchwork of the city’s unavoidable protests, including pro-China agitprop, sympathetic memes and imagery from the hundreds of thousands of pro-democracy marchers who have braved police crackdowns. But the same searches for Hong Kong on TikTok, the short-video app from a Beijing-based tech giant that has gone viral in the U.S., reveal a remarkably different — and, for the Chinese government, more politically convenient — version of reality: playful selfies, food photos and singalongs, with barely a hint of unrest in sight. ... The #antielab hashtag, a central organizing post named for protesters’ resistance to an extradition bill seen as weakening Hong Kong sovereignty, has more than 34,000 posts on Instagram but only 11 posts on TikTok, totaling about 3,000 views. The hashtags for #HongKongProtests and #HongKongProtestors, some of the biggest rallying points on Twitter, return either a single video or an error message: “Couldn’t find this hashtag: Check out trending videos.” The #HongKongProtest hashtag showed six videos, totaling about 5,000 views.” [Washington Post, [9/15/19](#)]

Headline: Washington Post: “TikTok’s Beijing roots fuel censorship suspicion as it builds a huge U.S. audience.” [Washington Post, [9/15/19](#)]

Chinese Government Has Extensive History Of Using Social Media For Disinformation Campaigns

Headline: Foreign Policy: “Chinese State Media Is Pushing Pro-Russian Misinformation Worldwide.” [Foreign Policy, [3/23/22](#)]

Headline: Washington Post: “China is Russia’s most powerful weapon for information warfare.” [Washington Post, [4/8/22](#)]

Headline: BuzzFeed News: “Have You Seen These Ads About Hong Kong's Protests? China Certainly Hopes You Have.” [Buzzfeed News, [8/19/19](#)]

Headline: New York Times: “China Is Waging a Disinformation War Against Hong Kong Protesters.” [New York Times, [8/13/19](#)]

Headline: The Intercept: “Twitter Helped Chinese Government Promote Disinformation On Repression Of Uyghurs.” [The Intercept, [8/19/19](#)]

CCTV And CGTN Promoted Russian Disinformation About Ukraine, Ran Ads Denying Human Rights Abuses Committed By Chinese Government Against Muslim Minorities. “Chinese state media entities have long used social media to target and influence Western audiences. Earlier this year, China Central Television (CCTV) and its global arm, China Global Television Network (CGTN), promoted Russian disinformation on Facebook about Ukraine. The outlets previously ran ads on the platform denying extensively documented human rights abuses perpetrated by the Chinese government against Muslim minorities. CCTV/CGTN did not reply to a request for comment.” [Forbes, [8/10/22](#)]

Xinhua News Agency Denied Government Abuses In Xinjiang, Smeared Protestors In Hong Kong And Blamed Russian Invasion Of Ukraine On NATO. “Just last month, Xinhua News Agency denied that China has forced ethnic minorities into manual labor in Xinjiang, calling the reports “fabricated false information.” The agency has repeatedly posted denials of the government’s abuse of Uyghur communities, while also promoting the local folk artists of “Wondrous Xinjiang.” In 2019, the outlet ran ads on Facebook and Twitter to smear protestors in Hong Kong; earlier this year, it ran more, blaming Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on “NATO’s ambition to expand eastward.” Xinhua News did not reply to a request for comment.” [Forbes, [8/10/22](#)]

Chinese State Media Bought Ads On Facebook, Twitter To Push Narrative That Pro-Democracy Protests In Hong Kong Were Populated By “Public Enemy” And Claiming A “Silent Majority” Opposed The Movement. “Chinese state-run media outlets have been buying advertisements on Twitter and Facebook to push the Chinese Communist Party’s narrative of the demonstrations in Hong Kong, painting protesters as the “public enemy” and claiming a “silent majority” does not support the pro-democracy movement. China has been using increasingly hostile rhetoric about the protests in its state media for weeks. But the ads mark a new step in trying to reach wider audiences — BuzzFeed News found nearly 50 different promoted tweets from the Twitter accounts of Xinhua News Agency, China’s official state-run press organization; the Chinese Communist Party–owned China Daily; and China Plus News, the English-language site of the state-owned China Radio International. Similar ads were also running on Facebook from Xinhua and CGTN, a state-owned 24-hour news channel that broadcasts in English.” [Buzzfeed News, [8/19/19](#)]