

TikTok on Trial: The Latest Front in the U.S. Tech War on China

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On March 23, CEO of TikTok Shou Zi Chew testified before the House Energy and Commerce Committee addressing concerns over the popular social media app's data collection practices and parent company ByteDance's alleged links to the Chinese government. Though TikTok is a subsidiary of ByteDance, which is based in Beijing, it operates as an independent entity. Chew has [maintained](#) the company has never shared user data with the Chinese government, and would refuse if pressed to do so. Still, the Congressional hearings amounted to nothing more than racist political theater, a McCarthyite witch trial, in which members of Congress who demonstrated little understanding of how basic social media algorithms—or even home Wi-Fi networks—work attempted to spuriously link Chew, who was born, raised, and currently lives in Singapore, [to the Communist Party of China](#).

At one point during the hearings, Rep. Debbie Lesko of Arizona [asks Chew](#), "Do you agree that the Chinese government is persecuting the Uyghur population?" to which a perplexed Chew firmly responds, "Congresswoman, I'm here to describe TikTok and what we do as a platform."

Make no mistake: the TikTok hearings had nothing to do with the baseless threat of Chinese surveillance and everything to do with maintaining the dominance of U.S. capitalism. TikTok is the most popular and most frequently downloaded social media app worldwide, boasting 150 million users in the United States alone. The [overall time users spend on TikTok](#) now far exceeds some of its U.S. competitors, and it has been rapidly pulling digital advertising away from these same companies.

The hearings were just the latest in the U.S. tech war against China—a key front in the new Cold War—and Silicon Valley has found as its ally rising anti-Chinese sentiment and, through the arm of the capitalist state, is weaponizing such Red Scare tactics to ensure tech dominance. This explains why the U.S. government is trying to force the sale of TikTok to a U.S. company, or ban it entirely, which would drive its users to U.S. [competitors](#) like Meta,

Instagram Reels (owned by Meta), Snapchat, or YouTube Shorts.

Either way, Silicon Valley stands to benefit. And even if the U.S. government doesn't go through with a TikTok ban, the spectacle of the hearings and fearmongering over Chinese surveillance was enough [to drive up stocks](#) for Meta and Snapchat.

Facebook's war against TikTok

TikTok is especially popular among Gen Z, a key demographic which Facebook has [almost completely lost](#). In order to regain this target age group, its parent company Meta has played an instrumental role in fanning the supposed dangers of its competitor.

In 2022, [The Washington Post](#) uncovered internal emails revealing that Meta had hired consulting firm Targeted Victory to launch a nationwide lobbying and media campaign to eliminate its competitor by portraying it as a "danger to American children and society." As part of this campaign, operatives were instructed to use TikTok as a way to divert attention and criticism away from Facebook's own data collection practices. Other tactics included publicizing stories in local media about "dangerous teen trends" which had supposedly gone viral on TikTok (with many of them actually originating on Facebook) and writing op-eds and letters to the editor posing as concerned parents critical of TikTok to local newspapers. [One such letter, published in The Denver Post](#) from a "new parent" raised the concern about the Chinese government's ability to access TikTok's U.S. user data. "Many people even suspect China is deliberately collecting behavioral data on our kids (the Chinese government and TikTok deny that they share data)," it read. "We should all be alarmed at the grave consequences these privacy issues present."

Of course, data privacy concerns are not unique to TikTok. [Facebook itself surveils its users](#), using the location tracking feature to monitor user activity in order to better predict what type of targeted ads to show—this feature works even when the app is closed, constantly collecting information about the user. Facebook even appears to go as far as [tracking text messages and phone calls and having the ability to access photos on user devices](#).

The issue lies not with individual apps themselves, but that Congress refuses to pass any kind of comprehensive privacy legislation regulating social media apps and protecting users from tech companies misusing their data. And the reason for this is that Silicon Valley represents a powerful political force in Washington: in 2021, the top seven tech companies spent over [\\$70 million](#) lobbying to fight legislation regulating the industry. These firms spent more money than other lobbying giants like the pharmaceuticals, oil, and gas industries.

The previous year, in 2020, Meta alone had spent a [record \\$20 million lobbying Congress](#), breaking its previous year's record of \$19 million. These are just a few of the bills Meta lobbied against within the past couple of years:

- [Algorithmic Justice and Online Platform Transparency Act](#): This bill would have forced social media platforms to explain their algorithms and data collection to its users.
- [Justice Against Malicious Algorithms Act of 2021](#): This bill would have held social media companies accountable for showing content that could lead to harm.
- [Protecting Americans from Dangerous Algorithms Act](#): A similar bill to hold social media companies accountable for showing content that could lead to harm.
- [Information Transparency & Personal Data Control Act](#): This bill would have

forced companies to provide their privacy policies in “plain English” and prompt users to “opt in” before they could use their sensitive private data.

Along with data privacy legislation, Meta, along with other tech giants Amazon, Google, and Apple, have [lobbied against bills promoting competition in the tech industry](#).

It should also be noted that Meta is one of the [top stocks](#) owned by members of Congress.

Silicon Valley capital and the state

The issue of TikTok for the U.S. government is not one of national security or the CPC obtaining American user data—the issue is that the government *itself* wants access to that data and cannot strongarm ByteDance into handing it over like they can U.S. tech companies, who often comply with Justice Department officials when requested to release information. How often do U.S. government officials request data from these tech firms? According to [The New York Times](#):

Google said that it received 39,500 requests in the United States over that period [in the first half of 2020], covering nearly 84,700 accounts, and that it turned over some data in 83 percent of the cases. Google did not break down the percentage of requests in which it turned over basic data versus content, but it said that 39 percent of the requests were subpoenas while half were search warrants.

Facebook said that it received 61,500 requests in the United States over the period, covering 106,100 accounts, and that it turned over some data to 88 percent of the requests. The company said it received 38,850 warrants and complied with 89 percent of them over the period, and 10,250 subpoenas and complied with 85 percent.

This reveals the mutually beneficial relationship here between tech companies and the U.S. government: the state protects the interests of Silicon Valley capital, and in return, Big Tech complies with its data requests.

CPC “brainwashing” and “cognitive warfare”

Aside from the fearmongering around granting the CPC ability to access U.S. user data, another narrative pushed during the lead up to, and immediately following, the Congressional hearings was that TikTok is part of the CPC’s [“cognitive warfare”](#) psychological operations campaign to control Americans’ minds. This is an absurd accusation recycled from Red Scare propaganda from the last Cold War, in which the U.S. government incited fear among its citizens of [Soviet and Chinese brainwashing](#).

In a November 2022 interview, Tristan Harris, co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology, [tells 60 Minutes](#), “In [China’s] version of TikTok [Douyin], if you’re under 14 years old, they show you science experiments you can do at home, museum exhibits, patriotism videos, and educational videos. And they also limit it to only 40 minutes per day. Now they don’t ship that version of TikTok to the rest of the world. So it’s almost like they recognize that technology is influencing kids’ development, and they make their domestic version a spinach version of TikTok, while they ship the opium version to the rest of the world.”

Putting aside the extremely poor taste accusation about “digital opium”, considering China

is a nation that lost two wars trying to put a stop to Europeans flooding its ports with *real* opium in the 1800s resulting in its “century of humiliation,” this is another case of imperialist media and its mouthpieces shifting the blame for American societal issues onto the CPC. TikTok and its Chinese counterpart Douyin show different kinds of videos, because unlike the U.S., the Chinese government regulates the content that children consume on social media apps—a move which U.S. politicians often decry as “authoritarian” overreach. Once again, the issue is one of lack of government regulation at the behest of Silicon Valley tech companies.

Despite this, members of the ruling class continued to parrot this Sinophobic propaganda point. “The algorithms that determine what you see on TikTok [are] determined out of Beijing by China,” [claimed](#) Democratic chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee Mark Warner in February. “If you look at what Chinese kids are seeing on their version of TikTok, which emphasizes science and engineering, versus what our kids and kids around the world are seeing, it is dramatically different. So both from a data collection, and from frankly, a propaganda tool, it is of huge concern.”

And during the Congressional hearings, when questioning Chew, Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers accused TikTok’s algorithm of promoting suicide, drug use, self-harm, and eating disorders to children, while noting that this same type of content was banned on Douyin.

After the Congressional testimony, Rep. Mike Gallagher, chair of the Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party, emphasized the imperative to take swift action against TikTok, [proclaiming on ABC’s *This Week*](#), “It’s not just exfiltrating data from an American phone, it’s what they’re able to push to Americans through the algorithm—control our sense of reality, control the news, meddle in future elections.”

Unsurprisingly, the accusation that China is engaging in psychological warfare and “brainwashing,” like so many others, is another case of U.S. projection. The U.S. government has itself orchestrated [disinformation campaigns](#) on social media to promote “[pro American narratives](#)” in places like Iran, China, and Russia. In fact, as early as 2011, *The Guardian* [reported](#) that the US military had even contracted out the development of software to create internet personalities to influence online conversations to more easily spread pro-American propaganda, and it was again [brought to light last year](#). And even more recently still, the release of the [Twitter files](#) earlier this year revealed the extent to which government agencies maintain close ties to online platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Google, and Apple, influencing online conversations to support the Saudi-led war on Yemen, pro-U.S. presence in Syria, and anti-Iran messaging in Iraq, among other propaganda campaigns.

And one shouldn’t forget that in 2010, the U.S. government [funded](#) the development of ZunZuneo in Cuba, a social media platform similar to Twitter, in order to promote political propaganda in the hopes of inciting a “Cuban Spring” youth revolt to topple the socialist government.

The U.S. seeks to eliminate economic competition

Like its ban on the sale and import of Chinese technology giant Huawei products to the U.S., the hysteria over TikTok has little to do with national security, and is instead rooted in fears over a Chinese company threatening U.S. dominance over the tech sector.

Not long ago, the U.S. ruling class was content to use China as a source of cheap labor and super profits, in exchange for American technological transfer. Now that China has begun to overcome its under-development and managed to build up its own tech sector, U.S. corporations seek to eliminate their economic competitor.

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Featured image: Screenshot of TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew testifying before Congress on CSPAN.

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