

TikTok fears point to larger problem: Poor media literacy in the social media age

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The U.S. government moved closer to banning the video social media app TikTok after the House of Representatives [attached the measure](#) to an emergency spending bill on Apr. 17, 2024. The House voted on each of the four components of the bill, and the one affecting TikTok [passed](#)

[360–58](#) on Apr. 20, 2024. The packaging is likely to improve the bill's chances in the Senate, and President Joe Biden has indicated that [he will sign the bill](#) if it reaches his desk.

The bill would force ByteDance, the Chinese company that owns TikTok, to either sell its American holdings to a U.S. company or face a ban in the country. The company has said it will [fight any effort to force a sale](#).

The proposed legislation was motivated by a set of national security concerns. For one, ByteDance can be required to assist the Chinese Communist Party in gathering intelligence, according to the [Chinese National Intelligence Law](#). In other words, the data TikTok collects can, in theory, be used by the Chinese government.

Furthermore, TikTok's popularity in the United States, and the fact that many [young people](#) get their news from the platform—[one-third of Americans](#) under the age of 30—turns it into a potent instrument for Chinese political influence.

Indeed, the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence recently claimed that TikTok accounts run by a Chinese propaganda arm of the government targeted candidates from both [political parties](#) during the U.S. midterm election cycle in 2022, and the Chinese Communist Party [might attempt to influence the U.S. elections in 2024](#) in order to sideline critics of China and magnify U.S. social divisions.

To these worries, proponents of the legislation have appended two more arguments: It's only right to curtail TikTok because China [bans most U.S.-based social media networks](#) from operating there, and there would be nothing new in such a ban, since the U.S. [already restricts the foreign](#)

[ownership](#) of important media networks.

Some of these arguments are stronger than others.

China doesn't need TikTok to collect data about Americans. The Chinese government can [buy all the data it wants](#) from data brokers because the U.S. has no federal data privacy laws to speak of. The fact that China, a country that Americans criticize for its authoritarian practices, bans [social media](#) platforms is hardly a reason for the U.S. to do the same.

I believe the cumulative force of these claims is substantial and the legislation, on balance, is plausible. But banning the app is also a red herring.

In the past few years, my colleagues and I at [UMass Boston's Applied Ethics Center](#) have been studying the impact of AI systems on how people understand themselves. Here's why I think the recent move against TikTok misses the larger point: Americans' sources of information have declined in quality and the problem goes beyond any one social media platform.

The deeper problem

Perhaps the most compelling argument for banning TikTok is that the app's ubiquity and the fact that so many young Americans get their news from it turns it into an effective [tool for political influence](#). But the proposed solution of switching to American ownership of the app ignores an even more fundamental threat.

The deeper problem is not that the Chinese government can easily manipulate content on the app. It is, rather, that people think it is OK to get their news from social media in the first place. In other words, the

real national security vulnerability is that people have acquiesced to informing themselves through social media.

Social media is not made to inform people. It is designed to capture consumer attention for the sake of advertisers. With slight variations, that's the business model of all platforms. That's why a lot of the content people encounter on social media is violent, divisive and disturbing. Controversial posts that generate strong feelings [literally capture users' notice](#), hold their gaze for longer, and provide advertisers with improved opportunities to monetize engagement.

There's an important difference between actively consuming serious, well-vetted information and being manipulated to spend as much time as possible on a platform. The former is the lifeblood of democratic citizenship because being a citizen who participates in political decision-making requires having reliable information on the issues of the day. The latter amounts to letting your attention get hijacked for someone else's financial gain.

If TikTok is banned, many of its users [are likely to migrate to Instagram and YouTube](#). This would benefit Meta and Google, their parent companies, but it wouldn't benefit national security. People would still be exposed to as much junk news as before, and experience shows that these social media platforms could be vulnerable to manipulation as well. After all, the Russians primarily [used Facebook and Twitter to meddle in the 2016 election](#).

Media and technology literacy

That Americans have settled on getting their information from outlets that are uninterested in informing them undermines the very requirement of serious political participation, namely educated decision-making. This problem is not going to be solved by restricting access to foreign apps.

Research suggests that it will only be alleviated by [inculcating media and technology literacy habits](#) from an early age. This involves teaching young people how social media companies make money, how algorithms shape what they see on their phones, and how different types of content affect them psychologically.

My colleagues and I have just launched a pilot program to boost digital media literacy with the [Boston Mayor's Youth Council](#). We are talking to Boston's youth leaders about how the technologies they use everyday undermine their privacy, about the role of algorithms in shaping everything from their taste in music to their political sympathies, and about how generative AI is going to influence their ability to think and write clearly and even who they count as friends.

We are planning to present them with evidence about the adverse effects of excessive social media use on their mental health. We are going to talk to them about taking time away from their phones and developing a healthy skepticism towards what they see on social media.

Protecting people's capacity for critical thinking is a challenge that calls for bipartisan attention. Some of these measures to boost media and technology literacy might not be popular among tech users and tech companies. But I believe they are necessary for raising thoughtful citizens rather than passive social media consumers who have surrendered their attention to commercial and political actors who do not have their interests at heart.

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