

TikTok

THE CHILDREN'S ENTERTAINMENT APP
THAT BECAME A SECURITY PROBLEM

RECENT UPDATES SINCE THIS BRIEF WAS PUBLISHED IN 2023

Elections and interference

In Europe, political shockwaves could be felt after the first round of the 2024 Romanian presidential election in November was annulled by the Romanian Supreme Court due to suspected election interference, mainly on TikTok.¹ The first round resulted in a win for the far-right, pro-Russian, ultranationalist candidate Calin Georgescu, who was polling poorly right before the election. During the final month running up to the election, thousands of old TikTok accounts featuring and promoting Georgescu were reactivated.² According to unclassified documents from the Romanian Supreme Council of National Defense, the accounts had been created by a foreign state in 2016.

TikTok is also growing as a news source for voters around the world. In the 2024 United States (U.S.) presidential elections, 17 percent of U.S. adults received their news from TikTok, compared to only 3 percent in 2020.³ In Sweden, TikTok is the most popular source of society-related news for young women born in the 2000s; more than one fourth of Swedes born in the 2000s and almost half of the women born in this period use TikTok for news consumption.⁴

Social media bans

The U.S. has a TikTok ban coming into effect on January 19th 2025 if TikTok, more specifically its Chinese parent company ByteDance, does not sell off the platform.⁵ In a Federal court ruling on December 6th, 2024, the law was upheld against a challenge from TikTok.⁶ The case was then taken up by the Supreme Court, with oral arguments heard on January 10, 2025, in a last attempt by Tik-Tok to prevent its banning.⁷

Australia has introduced a social media ban for children under 16 years, without exemptions for existing users or those with parental consent.⁷ The ban is intended to include the platforms SnapChat, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and X. The main justification for the ban is to protect children under 16 years from online harms such as bullying, anxiety, and exploitation, while holding tech companies accountable for ensuring the safety of young users.

1. CNN, "Romania's top court annuls presidential election result," 7/12-24.

2. BBC, "Romania's cancelled presidential election and why it matters," 6/12-24.

3. Pew Research Center, "Social Media and News Fact Sheet," 17/9-24.

4. The Swedish Internet Foundation, "Samhällsnheter i traditionella och digitala medier," 10/10-23.

5. NPR, "Court upholds a U.S. ban on TikTok," 6/12-24.

6. The Verge, "TikTok ban: all the news on attempts to ban the video platform," 16/12-24.

7. BBC, "US Supreme Court to hear TikTok challenge to potential ban," 18/12-25. The Supreme Court had not yet made a decision at the time of this publication.

8. BBC, "Australia approves social media ban on under-16s," 29/12-24.

More sophisticated studies on TikTok have been conducted

TikTok has attracted increasing attention in academia and research. A recent report by the Network Contagion Research Institute (NCRI) looks at the potential for content manipulation on the platform, specifically through specific moderation algorithms or practices. The report establishes that "TikTok algorithms actively suppress content critical of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) while simultaneously boosting pro-China propaganda and promoting distracting, irrelevant content," thereby "undermining free expression and destabilizing democratic nations from within."⁹

The NCRI conducted one experiment with "user journeys" to simulate the experiences of actual users constructed as young Americans. In that "journey," content that criticised China's human rights record was 87 percent less visible than content positive of the CCP, despite the fact that the critical content had considerably more likes than the CCP-friendly content. In another experiment, 1200 Americans were surveyed on their views on China's human rights record. The results showed that users who spent more than three hours a day on TikTok were 50 percent more likely to hold a more positive view on the human rights record than non-TikTok-users.

A study conducted by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue focusing on hate and disinformation targeting migrants and refugees on TikTok found that the platform failed to follow its own community guidelines; of the 104 videos in the

sample, only 3.8 percent were removed between the collection period and the time the report was written (a period of 29 days), despite the fact that they appear to violate "TikTok community guidelines on hate speech and hateful behaviors, harassment and bullying, and misinformation."¹⁰

According to an experiment conducted by NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, TikTok was the least efficient platform, together with the Russian Vkontakte, to identify and remove inauthentic accounts. Only 3 percent of the false accounts on TikTok were identified and removed, compared to 50 percent on the platform X.¹¹

Sentiments about TikTok - more positive?

At the same time as a ban in the U.S. is drawing closer, the risks of children's exposure to social media are widely discussed. In this context, the public's views on TikTok do not seem to be any more critical than of other social media platforms. A study by Pew Research Center showed that public support for a TikTok ban in the U.S. is declining.¹² Support for the ban has also dropped substantially within both the Democratic and Republican parties. From March 2023 to July-August 2024, support for the ban fell from 60 percent among Republicans and Republican-leaning independents to 42 percent and from 43 percent among Democrats and Democrat-leaning independents to 24 percent.

9. Network Contagion Research Institute, "The CCP's Digital Charm Offensive: How TikTok's Search Algorithm and Pro-China Influence Networks Indoctrinate GenZ Users in the United States," 8-24.

10. Institute for Strategic Dialogue, "TikTok and Anti-Migrant & Anti-Refugee Content," 12/9-24.

11. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, "Social Media Manipulation for Sale," 9-24.

12. Pew Research Center, "Support for a U.S. TikTok ban continues to decline, and half of adults doubt it will happen," 5/9-24.

Sweden

In Sweden, TikTok as a gateway to criminality has received attention at the highest political level. The Minister of Justice, Mr Gunnar Strömmer, and the Government Offices brought the platforms together for a meeting on gang criminality and the recruitment of children to criminality through social media.¹³ Criminals, or perhaps the more suitable term “crimefluencers,”¹⁴ use TikTok to glorify the criminal lifestyle by flaunting wealth, luxuries, and violence.¹⁵ Social media is also used directly to coordinate criminal operations and as a marketplace for criminal tasks. Through the platform and its algorithms, thousands of minors and young users are reached and exposed to an increasing number of crimefluencers that lure them into crime. Gangs are also using TikTok to mock rivals and conduct propaganda campaigns that fuel violence between gangs.

In a surprising turn of events, the Swedish Armed Forces decided to start using TikTok as a channel for communication. Their argument is that TikTok is an important channel for reaching the public, recruiting to the Armed Forces, and combatting disinformation. Johan Landeström, the Head of Marketing at the Swedish Armed

Forces, said to *Officerstidningen* that “3.2 million Swedes, mainly between 10-30 years-old, use the platform,” and that this group “spend[s] 100 minutes every day on TikTok.”¹⁶ The Swedish Armed Forces closest ally and partner, the Finnish Defense Forces, does not operate on TikTok and it seems not have any such plans according to public broadcaster Yle.¹⁷

In fact, as TikTok itself is defined as a security threat,¹⁸ Swedish government agencies ought not to seek further normalization. Instead of casting TikTok as an actor to work with as a problem-solver for social problems such as gang criminality, officials should implement the same precautionary measures that they recommend for others. Engaging more with TikTok is also fuelling growth and directing more of the Swedish public to the platform.

13. Resumé, “Danmark och Sverige vill pressa Tiktok – för att stoppa gängen,” 21/8-24; Omni, “Strömmer åker till nytt möte om gängrekrytering,” 6/12-24.

14. TV4, “Nya fenomenet: ‘Krimfluencers’ skrämmar svenska barn till lydnad,” 23/10-23.

15. The Swedish Police, “Så kan den digitala rekryteringen av barn och unga till kriminalitet gå till,” 25/10-24.

16. Officerstidningen, “Försvarsmaktens marknadschef om beslutet att skaffa Tiktok,” 14/10-24.

17. Yle, “Svenska försvaret etablerar sig på Tiktok – ”Som att predika avhållsamhet men själv köra med kondom,” 3/10-24.

18. ABC News, “European Commission bans TikTok from employees' phones, citing cybersecurity threat,” 23/2-24.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Information and knowledge sharing: There is a need for a deeper and multidimensional analysis of how new digital platforms and services based in and controlled by authoritarian states, like China and Russia, are used in Sweden, especially by public actors and government agencies. Data management and information operations should be in focus. The relevant academic and security organizations should exchange and share knowledge with the public. This could include government inquiries that are conducted with parliamentary committees, such as the defence, justice, cultural affairs, education, and transport and communications committees. These are steps that must be taken immediately to protect Sweden's democratic rule and national security, especially after the development in Romania.

Expanded recommendations for more groups, including politicians and key actors in society: The prohibitions and recommendations that are now issued to politicians and civil servants in the EU and Sweden can be used as a basis for guidelines that are directed to local officials and employees in municipalities and regions, as well as to other organizations and actors with key functions in society. That key agencies, such as the Swedish Armed Forces, take decisions that contradict Swedish national interests is an example why such measures are so badly needed. In the Swedish model of government administration, agencies, municipalities and regions have autonomy and authorities largely act independently from political leadership. Thus, these actors cannot sit and wait for laws or regulations from the government that micro-manages their conduct. Instead, they should look at what the government is doing and act similarly when it comes to modern and complex security threats. **A coherent TikTok strategy from top to bottom was needed already yesterday.**

Information campaigns: The relevant government agencies, such as the National Cyber Security Center, that is now being placed under FRA, National Defence Radio Establishment (i.e. signal intelligence) Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (to be renamed the Swedish Civil Defence Agency in 2026) and the Psychological Defence Agency, should be made responsible for informing the public on data security and privacy, as well as foreign actors' interests in this information for influence operations purposes.

Involve youth perspectives and schools in the implementation of security policies: The youngest Swedes are a digital generation. Strong digital protections for minors must encompass more than internet safety, password security, and anti-bullying strategies. Knowledge and strategies must be accessible to all those working with youth.

Communications and media platforms should be regarded and treated as critical infrastructure: Ownership, control, and influence of platforms need not make a dramatic difference in times of stability and where there is resilience and knowledge and the users are well-educated. But Europe, and liberal democracies at large, are under pressure both from Russia's war on Ukraine and hybrid warfare from China, Russia and Iran. Communications will be weaponized for many years to come. We shall not be unarmed by letting authoritarian states and dictators use our freedoms against us. This means that the EU and Sweden need sovereignty and control over this strategic infrastructure. Banning Huawei from 5G was one step in that direction, but it is not nearly enough.

A soft ban of communication platforms owned, controlled or influenced by authoritarian states and dictators:

The ban would not alter present legislation, but it can be effective in the shorter run and needs to be put in place in order to protect the larger public from disinformation. It can consist of sharper recommendations toward children and the youth, including instruments such as warning labels and expanded information in app descriptions on app marketplaces. These instruments should provide details about any potential connections the app may have, for example through its parent company, to authoritarian states as well as communicate why a foreign state operating with malign influence is different as an owner of media and communication platforms. This can be complemented with an aggressive scrutiny of how the Digital Services Act (DSA) is followed, taxation, or other instruments. We should consider and prepare for a temporary or permanent hard ban on all Chinese applications to be employed if China for example attacks Taiwan, if there is sufficient evidence of TikTok-enabled election interference in Sweden or other free countries or if China in other ways behaves more aggressively.

Research and policy development: As more evidence emerges that China supports Russia's war in Ukraine, and there are more examples of the spread of disinformation on platforms triggered or supported by Russian interests, more focus needs to be shifted on this phenomenon. It would be desirable to have a proper and **sophisticated disinformation tracker** which can help assess, track, and collect evidence that can also serve the public. In an increasingly digitalised world, Sweden and the EU need to invest in research, policy development, enhanced regulations, and educate the public in order to strengthen our psychological defense. We will continue to be challenged by malign states with an antidemocratic agenda in the foreseeable future.

TikTok

THE CHILDREN'S ENTERTAINMENT APP THAT BECAME A SECURITY PROBLEM

Anna Rennéus Guthrie
Patrik Oksanen

Summary

TikTok is a global success story. In just a few short years, the app has reached over a billion users worldwide, challenging Western social media companies while also stress testing democratic countries' security policies. Today, the app is banned among a substantial number of government institutions. Members of the European Parliament, for example, are no longer allowed to use the app on work devices. Similar restrictions have been imposed on employees of the Swedish Government Offices.

At the same time, TikTok is one of the best ways to reach youth around the world, not least in Sweden. Many organizations and government agencies see the potential in connecting with citizens, stakeholders, and customers through the platform. However, security policy experts point out the risks associated with TikTok's parent company ByteDance, located in China and subjected to Chinese law and influence. Moreover, there are risks associated with how TikTok manages user data. There is substantial potential for China to use the app for malign influence operations.

Sweden, like many other countries, recognized the risks associated with the app at an early stage, but only put tougher restrictions on the public sector's use of the platform in 2023. This was a good first step, but greater scrutiny of TikTok's role as a communications platform is needed. In particular, the risks related to minors and the youth, as well as first-time voters, should be investigated. Measures should also be taken to ensure that Swedish users' data does not fall into the wrong hands. More broadly, there is a need to increase awareness of information influence operations linked to social media platforms like TikTok.



Anna Rennéus Guthrie is the Director of think tank Stockholm Free World Forum. For the last 15 years, she has worked as a journalist and opinion leader within politics and business-related issues. In recent years, she has participated more actively in the debate on foreign influence and raised concerns about the increasing targeting of the West by authoritarian states.



Patrik Oksanen is a resident senior fellow at Stockholm Free World Forum. He has extensive experience as a journalist, writer and opinion maker in security and defence. He was named Opinion writer of the year 2017 by Dagens Opinion and Journalist of the year in 2018 by Dagens Media. His book *Skarpa Skärvor* shows how information warfare is a threat to the open society.

Introduction

In Sweden today, every other middle schooler is growing up with TikTok on their or their parents' cell phone. At the same time, the Chinese tech giant is entering into partnerships with several established societal actors and institutions in Sweden. Traditional social media companies like Facebook, Instagram, and SnapChat paved the way for the newcomer to quickly become established as a cornerstone of everyday communication. However, there remain significant gaps in understanding of how TikTok actually works and what happens with user-generated data.

The consequences of enormous amounts of data being shared daily with a company based in an authoritarian state raises many questions and should cause more concern than is currently the case.

There are multiple reasons for Sweden to strengthen its protective framework for data management and privacy. The relationship between China and Sweden, like China's relationship with many other Western countries, has deteriorated in recent years.²⁰ With war in Europe and Sweden mobilizing to join NATO, China, like Russia, perceives the Western alliance as an indirect threat.²¹ China is one of the state actors actively engaged in disinformation at a global, national, and local level.²⁰ China is a world leader in new technologies where AI and data-usage are particularly sought-after competencies.

China has shown great interest in IT infrastructure through companies like Huawei, ZTE, and Bytedance, investing a large amount of resources into becoming a world leader in AI. The modern surveillance state that the Chinese regime has built up is sophisticated. It includes one surveillance camera per resident and police helmets with facial recognition technology coupled to a database with personal information, along with many other surveillance techniques and technologies.²¹

About TikTok

FAST FACTS:

- A rapidly growing entertainment platform consisting of short videoclips and live streams. The app has gained over a billion users in only a few short years.
- The app has a young userbase and is popular among children and young adults. In Sweden, it is the most popular app amongst school-aged children.
- Owned by Bytedance with its headquarters in Beijing, China.
- Bytedance's founder, Zhang Yiming, is one of China's wealthiest individuals. Founded in 2012, Bytedance is now run by Singaporean Shou Zi Chew.
- The estimated value of Bytedance is 400 billion USD and TikTok upwards of 60 billion (2022).

19. Stockholm Free World Forum, "Temperaturmätare: Så ser svenska företag och lärosäten på utbytet med Kina," 9/12-21.

20. Swedish National China Centre, "Kinas syn på Nato och ett svenskt medlemskap," 17/7-22.

21. Stockholm Free World Forum, "Informationspandemi – desinformation i skuggan av coronakrisen," 20/3-20; Psychological Defence Agency, "Statliga kinesiska påverkansoperation mot demokratin i svenska kommuner," 2022.

22. Yle, "Det finns snart en övervakningskamera för varannan invånare i Kina – och polisen övergår till Robocop-teknologi," 6/2-22.

The children's entertainment app that became a security problem

Bytedance's and TikTok's founder and former CEO Zhang Yimin, an engineer specializing in microelectronics and programming and one of China's wealthiest individuals, left his CEO position in November 2021.²³ Today, Singaporean Shou Zi Chew is CEO.²⁴

Launched in 2016, TikTok is a digital platform and app where users can upload and share short videoclips. As of 2024, the app is used by about a billion people worldwide. Europe has around 228 million users (2022).²⁵ TikTok is distinct from many other social media platforms in that it is video-based. The app has a highly personalized feed, with individually tailored algorithms designed to hold the user's attention.

The majority of global TikTok users are children, youth, and young adults. About a quarter of all users are under the age of 19. The app is the number one choice for children and is the platform they spend the most time on.²⁶

In Sweden, as elsewhere, the number of TikTok users is growing. According to the Swedish Internet Foundation, 20 percent of Swedish internet users have used TikTok over the past 12 months and 12 percent use the app daily.²⁷ TikTok has had the most success among the youngest generation. Nearly 50 percent of middle school children use TikTok daily and 80 percent of high schoolers have used the app over the past year.

Users can chat and send messages in the app, but the most used features are uploading and sharing videos and live streams. An additional app, CapCut, used to edit videos before uploading, is also owned by TikTok's parent

company Bytedance.²⁸ CapCut is listed with a 12-year-old age limit in app stores. The app has had particular success in the U.S.. In Sweden, CapCut reached the top-20 most downloaded free apps in 2023.²⁹

While TikTok is first and foremost an entertainment app, many Americans have been receiving their news from TikTok. A 2022 Pew Research study showed that about 25 percent of young adults (aged 18-29) regularly get their news from TikTok.³⁰ A growing share of American adults are also regularly getting their news from TikTok, growing from 3 percent in 2020 to 10 percent in 2022. The growth goes against the general trend of fewer people using social media as a news source.

An increasing number of companies are showing interest in TikTok, particularly consumer-focused businesses. However, media consultants say many businesses remain cautious, not wanting to risk a situation where their operations might be exposed to data leaks through the app.³¹

TikTok's Owner

TikTok is owned by the Chinese company ByteDance and is the international version of the music app Douyin, available in China since 2016 and targeted at Chinese users.

In 2017–2018, Bytedance acquired the Chinese startup Musical.ly, and in 2018, the new app, now called TikTok, achieved a major global breakthrough when it reached 500 million users.

23. Forbes, "F-profile / real time net worth," 14/2-23.

24. CNN Business, "Who is Shou Zi Chew?" 20/1-23.

25. Statista, "Number of TikTok users in Europe from 2018 to 2028," 6/9-24.

26. Qustodio, "Screen Time All the Time," 2021.

27. The Swedish Internet Foundation, "Svenskarna och internet 2022," 11/10-22.

28. Tech Crunch, "ByteDaance's video editor CapCut is the latest to top the US app Store," 24/5-21.

29. SvD Näringsliv, "Techbrief," 20/3-23.

30. Pew Research Center, "More Americans – especially young adults – are regularly getting news on TikTok," 17/9-24.

31. Interview with social media consultant.

The children's entertainment app that became a security problem

Bytedance, valued in recent years at an estimated \$300–400 billion, has attracted several international investors and Chinese venture capitalists. Today, the company has a diverse mix of investors from various industries. One example is the longstanding, U.S.-based investor Susquehanna International Group, founded by options trader and billionaire Jeffrey S. Yass.³²

The Chinese state holds ownership in Bytedance through what is known as "golden shares," which, despite being a small stake, grants the state direct influence and control over critical decisions within the company.³³ On Bytedance's board, there is a member of the Communist Party, Wu Shugang, who previously held roles managing cyber strategy on behalf of the Chinese government.³⁴

Even in terms of corporate organizational structures, there are significant ties between Bytedance and TikTok, despite

being independent brands.³⁶ In larger Chinese companies, the state typically maintains influence through so-called party representatives.³⁷

In Bytedance's case, editor-in-chief Zhang Fuping serves as secretary of the company's Party Cell.³⁸ Zhang Fuping has declared that the company's mission is to convey "the correct political direction."³⁹

The Digital Goldmine: A Security Threat

Data is often referred to as the new gold. Today, many people voluntarily give away large amounts of their data through the daily use of mobile phones and the internet. This "gold" enables the calibration of both product development and marketing, while directly benefiting users through the creation of new products and services that solve problems and drive societal progress.

To some extent, transactions between individuals' personal data and organizations are regulated by law. Therefore, when downloading new features or software, users are formally required to accept the app's or program's terms of use. Despite these agreements, it remains difficult for individuals to gain an overview or control over how their data is actually managed in practice.

In the early days of digital platforms, debates about user privacy were intense. How were Google, Facebook, and other companies handling users' information? What protections did individuals have when sharing personal data on such

CHINA'S NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE LAW

China's National Intelligence Law first passed in 2014, entered into force 2017 and was updated in 2023, imposing a direct obligation on all Chinese citizens and companies, both in China and abroad, to report matters of interest to the Chinese state that can be used for intelligence purposes.³⁵ The tools available to the Chinese state to ensure access to information about individuals and companies have also increased, including surveillance of suspects, confiscation of vehicles and equipment, and inspection raids.

32. ProPublica, "Meet the Billionaire and Rising GOP Mega-Donor Who's Gaming the Tax System," 21/6-22.

33. Financial Times, "China moves to take 'golden shares' in Alibaba and Tencent units," 13/1-23.

34. Ibid.

35. Mannheimer Swartling, "Applicability of Chinese National Intelligence Law to Chinese and non-Chinese Entities," 1-19.

36. The Information, "The people with power at TikTok owner ByteDance," 23/2-23; Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media, "TikTok, ByteDance, and their ties to the Chinese Communist Party," 14/3-23.

37. SvD, "Generation Tiktok: Så tar sig Kina in i barnens värld," 5/8-22.

38. U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, "McCaul, Rogers Demand Answers From Admin on TikTok CFIUS Security Concerns," 22/12-22.

39. Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media, "TikTok, ByteDance, and their ties to the Chinese Communist Party," 14/3-23.

platforms? These were widely discussed questions. Today, a range of laws grounded in national and EU legislation are in place. The EU and the U.S. have introduced tools, such as GDPR, to protect users against the misuse of their data.⁴⁰

However, Western platforms have faced notable competition in recent years. A digital arms race is underway, driven largely by the potential of combining data and AI.⁴¹ Google and Facebook are being challenged by players from other parts of the world, most notably TikTok. While legacy companies have been heavily scrutinized, TikTok has assumed the role of the largest platform for children and youth relatively unimpeded.

Previous privacy concerns that accompanied the rise of Facebook and other social media platforms has waned. Fatigue may have set in. After years of increasingly digital lives, sharing information online no longer seems remarkable. The combination of a tech giant based in a dictatorship and childrens' data does not appear to trouble the broader public. Many seem to reason that there is already so much data about themselves (and their children) online, so what difference does another platform make?

The Risks: Data Leaks and Information Influence Operations

The two primary objections to TikTok are security concerns related to user data and malign information operations.

According to the FBI, the security risks associated with TikTok are significant. In part due to the app's ability to manipulate content, but also because of its Chinese

ownership, a country that FBI Director Chris Wray has stated "does not share our values."⁴² Wray argues that the app can be used by China for both influence operations and data collection, potentially serving as a tool for espionage.

Even if using the platform may not present an immediate risk to individual users, there is near-consensus among IT, data, and security experts about the risks posed by TikTok.⁴³ The primary concern is uncertainty and lack of trust over how TikTok manages its data. As mentioned, the Chinese security and intelligence laws grant the Chinese government the right to request information from companies and individuals for national security purposes. One major fear regarding TikTok is whether or not data collected on the app is, or could be, shared with the Chinese state.

According to TikTok's own disclosures, the platform collects data such as usernames, passwords, phone numbers, content of private messages, media (photos, recordings, and live streams created in the app), network information linked to the mobile phone, phone contacts, location data (GPS), and payment information, including bank card details.⁴⁴

A recent study indicates that TikTok collects significantly more information about its users than comparable platforms.⁴⁵ Analysts with backgrounds in U.S. and Australian intelligence agencies have highlighted additional vulnerabilities for TikTok users, noting that the app requests access to two types of location data commonly used for military purposes.

The potential for user data to be exploited for surveillance purposes has been well documented. TikTok's parent

40. European Commission, "Data protection."

41. Harvard Business Review, "Is China Emerging as the Global Leader in AI?" 17/2-21; World Economic Forum, "Here's what you need to know about the new AI 'arms race'," 22/2-21.

42. Time Magazine, "Why the FBI is concerned about TikTok," 3/12-22.

43. Interview with data expert.

44. TikTok, "Privacy Policy," 2/12-22.

45. The Times, "TikTok scours your phone for personal information," 13/2-23.

The children's entertainment app that became a security problem

company, ByteDance, was revealed to have monitored journalists from Financial Times, Forbes, and BuzzFeed in both the U.S. and China.⁴⁶

TikTok's content moderation is, according to experts, inconsistent and asymmetrical. Criticism of the Chinese regime or negative depictions of sensitive topics in China have been quickly removed, while material supporting the interests of the Chinese regime has been amplified.⁴⁷ On Douyin, TikTok's counterpart in China, the Chinese state is an active participant, running campaigns that support state narratives.⁴⁸

The content young users are exposed to on TikTok thus risks painting an authoritarian Chinese regime in a positive light. Given that TikTok reportedly uses some of the industry's most powerful algorithms, its influence is significantly larger than that of other search engines or social media platforms.

TikTok's role in spreading disinformation in the mainstream news cycle has also been hard to ignore. A 2022 study by NewsGuard highlighted significant deficiencies in the platform.⁴⁹ TikTok has acknowledged these issues in its work to refine its "code of practice," admitting that during the summer of 2022, thousands of accounts spread disinformation, in various European languages, about Russia's war against Ukraine.⁵⁰

A report to Australia's Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media concluded that TikTok's

parent company, ByteDance, cannot be regarded as an independent business but rather a hybrid company under significant control of the Chinese Communist Party. TikTok has the ability to steer content and calibrate narratives down to a micro level. Combined with the Chinese leadership's known intentions, TikTok is an elections interference risk—not only in terms of influencing outcomes but also in undermining the legitimacy of elections. The Select Committee report shows, for example, how the Chinese Armed Forces are mentioned positively, despite TikTok not being available in China itself. Relevant search results for terms like "Wuhan lab," one suspected source of the Covid-19 corona virus, are missing, indicating content moderation. Comparisons with Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube during the same time period revealed significant differences.⁵¹

Another troubling scandal that emerged in 2022 involved TikTok profiting from vulnerable people in war-torn Syria. BBC reporting revealed that nearly 70 percent of the funds raised through the app went directly to the company, with only a small portion reaching the refugees who were livestreamed begging on the platform.⁵²

TikTok and its partners now increasingly emphasize the importance of online safety and adhering to age restrictions, though these restrictions have proven very easy for children to bypass. Recent platform developments, such as "Project Clover," propose having a third party oversee data management. These changes come as the European Union takes a firmer stance on data protection in the EU's internal market.⁵³

46. Financial Times, "TikTok admits tracking FT journalist in leaks investigation," 22/12-22; The Guardian, "TikTok admits using its app to spy on reporters in efforts to track leaks," 23/12-22; Forbes, "TikTok Spied On Forbes Journalists," 22/12-22.

47. Interview with data and security experts.

48. Financial Review, "How Beijing uses TikTok's sister app to spread propaganda," 6/12-22.

49. CNN, "TikTok's search engine repeatedly delivers misinformation to its majority-young user base, report says," 18/9-2.

50. New York Times, "Influence Networks in Russia Misled European Users, TikTok Says," 9/2-23.

51. Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media, "TikTok, ByteDance, and their ties to the Chinese Communist Party," 14/3-23.

52. BBC, "TikTok profits from livestreams of families begging," 12/10-22.

53. European Commission, "Data Act: Commission proposes measures for a fair and innovative data economy," 23/2-23.

Growing Presence in Sweden

In Sweden, as in most other Western countries, China's TikTok experienced a surge in popularity during the pandemic as people faced restrictions on regular social activities.⁵⁴ Usage increased across all age groups, with the highest growth among those aged 26–35. However, in the 45+ age group, fewer than one in ten use the app.⁵⁵

Teachers were among those who discovered TikTok during the pandemic as well. The idea of encouraging students to get out of the house and engage in physical activity aligned well with an entertainment app with broader appeal (even though this connection was weaker in Sweden, where schools largely remained open).

” The idea of encouraging students to get out of the house and engage in physical activity aligned well with an entertainment app with broader appeal (even though this connection was weaker in Sweden, where schools largely remained open).

TikTok also established collaborations with several organizations, including Sweden's Generation Pep. Led by track and field athlete Carolina Klüft, and supported by Sweden's Royal Family, the initiative aimed to promote physical activity and a healthy lifestyle for children, and developed a teacher guide in partnership with TikTok that provides advice on improving physical and mental health. Other mental health organisations like Mind och Arts & Hearts, as well as the Swedish Internet Foundation which works for a positive development of the internet in Sweden, have also partnered with the initiative.

Generation Pep targets all schools in Sweden. Schools meeting the organization's criteria are certified as "Pep Schools." TikTok's teacher guide, promoted on Generation Pep's portal, is recommended for ages 13 and up.

Teachers themselves have also become influencers on TikTok. These "TikTok teachers" emphasize the importance of bridging the gap between children and adults. In a 2021 interview with Svenska Dagbladet, one teacher described creating dance videos that his students would join.⁵⁶ Here, as in many discussions about security aspects, the focus is primarily on content and interactions between children—highlighting traditional perspectives, such as the importance of being kind, avoiding harassment, and using social media as a positive force.

However, teachers are not the ones who have benefited most from TikTok. Many influencers and artists have used the app as a springboard to fame. One such example is Emil Henrohn, who secured a record deal after his TikTok song "Jag är mamma" (*I am mother*) went viral. Henrohn later participated in the Swedish preliminary competition for Eurovision.⁵⁷

Among Swedish TikTok accounts with the largest reach are profiles featuring content ranging from cooking, humor, and football to nature photography, stone-skip-ping, and Arabic-language medical advice. The Swedish Media Academy's (Medieakademin) "Power Barometer" highlights influential accounts such as an Iraqi doctor in Sweden who creates medical content in Arabic, amassing 2.5 million followers and 49 million views across 80 posts. Another example is the gymnastics group "Malmö Girls" (*Malmöflickorna*) which has 2.2 million followers, with its most-viewed clip receiving 71 million views.

It's not only individual representatives who use TikTok. As TikTok has become the leading communication channel for younger generations, public organizations at an

54. Statista, "Share of individuals using TikTok during the coronavirus outbreak in the United States in 2020," 28/12-22.

55. The Swedish Internet Foundation, "Svenskarna och Internetet," 15/12-20.

56. Svenska Dagbladet, "Läraren som gör danser på Tiktok," 19/2-21.

57. Svenska Dagbladet, "Min mamma vill inte synas eller höras," 16/11-22.

The children's entertainment app that became a security problem

institutional level have cautiously begun focusing on establishing a presence on the platform or, at the very least, reaching new target audiences associated with TikTok.⁵⁸

The Swedish welfare system became the center of a public controversy in 2022 when a disinformation campaign targeted social services, with claims that social workers were arbitrarily taking Muslim children away from their parents.⁵⁹ Initially, when the false narrative gained significant traction on TikTok, the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare decided to counter these claims only within its own communication channels.⁶⁰ The decision was then reconsidered, facing pressure to engage directly on TikTok, in order to better reach those exposed to the disinformation.⁶¹ The National Board of Health and Welfare stated that the campaign was limited in scope, with safety measures taken, and efforts focused on directing traffic from TikTok to their own channels.

A Swedish state actor less hesitant about using TikTok is the National Museum. The museum eagerly opened its doors for a workshop with TikTok and industry organizations to reach a broader audience by enhancing the cultural sector's presence on the platform. However, this initiative contradicts government guidelines, where ministers and staff have been advised not to use the app. As a result, the minister responsible for the National Museum cannot engage with the museum's initiatives on their work devices.

Global and Swedish Reactions

The international security landscape is significantly influencing how the West perceives the rise of TikTok. There

are multiple, serious factors that, taken together, create a clear threat for the global, rules based international order.

Russia's war against Ukraine continues, and the pandemic severely tested relations between the West and China. Even prior to the pandemic, tensions had already been rising due to unequal trade conditions, technology and innovation theft, and human rights issues, along with China's treatment of minority populations and its crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. China's claims over and threats toward Taiwan's democracy have further strained relations.

For the West, privacy concerns are becoming as pressing as the development of Huawei's 5G network. There are some similarities between how Huawei's presence in Sweden became a security issue and the darkening clouds over TikTok in the EU and U.S. One major distinction, however, is that TikTok has integrated itself into the lives of its billion plus users, transforming how people communicate with one another and organizations interact, promote, and communicate with their users, stakeholders, and consumers.

When Huawei and ZTE were barred from participating in Sweden's 5G development in 2021, the Swedish Post and Telecom Authority, in consultation with the Swedish Security Service (Säpo) and the Armed Forces, justified the decision by citing security concerns that Chinese companies could be exploited for espionage within telecom networks.⁶² Huawei and TikTok are similar in this regard, particularly when it comes to the influence operations they could conduct against the West. China's interest in Sweden and Swedish public opinion, as several analysts have shown, is complex and multifaceted.⁶³

However, TikTok's future in Sweden will largely be decided at the EU level. At the end of 2022, Swedish Prime

58. Resumé, "16 svenska TikTok-konton med internationell miljonpublik," 21/10–22.

59. Dagens Nyheter, "Omhandertagna barn används i påverkanskampanj mot socialtjänsten," 8/2–22.

60. SVT, "Socialstyrelsen ratar Tiktok: Vi gör bäst nytta i vår egen kanal," 5/12–22.

61. Voister, "Socialstyrelsen tänker om – annonserar nu på Tiktok," 15/2–23.

62. SVT, "Domen: Huawei stoppas i Sverige," 22/6–21.

63. Swedish Institute of International Affairs, "China's influence in the Swedish information environment," SVT, "Expertens varning om Tiktok: 'Aggressiv app,'" 18/8–20. 2022.

The children's entertainment app that became a security problem

Minster Ulf Kristersson noted the risks associated with dictators gaining access to user data. "We must be cautious; we need to keep track of where the data is going."⁶⁴

However, just as the Prime Minister was urging caution, his own party's communications team was using TikTok.

Since then, the EU has pumped the brakes. The EU Commission and Parliament have banned staff from, and recommended parliamentarians to stop, using the app.⁶⁵

Several countries, like the UK and New Zealand, have ruled that government employees cannot use the app on work devices.⁶⁶ Australia's decision to ban politicians from using TikTok has stirred debate on extending the ban to other platforms that may be sharing user data with third-parties like China.⁶⁷

The Swedish parliamentary elections in 2022 was the year many political parties became interested in TikTok's potential to reach voters, not least the far-right Sweden Democrats. Gains the Sweden Democrats and center-right Moderates made among youth voters, some experts argue, had to do with using TikTok.⁶⁸ The Center Party chose not to use the app, citing its Chinese origins, and has advocated for its ban in Parliament.⁶⁹

The Sweden Democrats seem to be divided over the issue. The party successfully used TikTok for campaign purposes but also actively pointed out the app's risks. Parliamentarians Björn Söder and Markus Wiechel raised the issue

relatively early in 2019, proposing a ban on TikTok for government employees and suggested a broader review of Swedes' use of technology from countries deemed to pose security threats.⁷⁰

If it has taken time for Sweden to recognize the downsides of TikTok, elsewhere in the EU—and especially in the U.S.—warnings have been voiced longer and louder. Criticism has centered on the amount, management, and sharing of data as well as the risk of censorship.⁷¹ Even in Sweden, security experts, including those from the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), have previously highlighted the dangers associated with such extensive data collection.⁷²

” If it has taken time for Sweden to recognize the downsides of TikTok, elsewhere in the EU — and especially in the United States — warnings have been voiced longer and louder.

German member of the EU Parliament Moritz Körner (Renew Europe) is one of the politicians who has advocated for a tougher stance against the Chinese tech company for many years. He has argued that the EU has been "naïve," exposing users to unacceptable risks, including

64. SvD, "Ulf Kristersson varnar för risker med appar som Tiktok," 25/11–22.

65. EU Politico, "Parliament bans staff from using TikTok over 'cybersecurity concerns'," 28/2–23.

66. Sky News, "TikTok banned from UK government phones," 16/3–23; CNN, "New Zealand joins US push to curb TikTok use on official phones with parliament ban," 17/3–23.

67. The Guardian, "TikTok bans on Australian government-issued phones should be extended to other apps, experts say," 7/3–23.

68. Dagens Nyheter, "Tiktok är jätte viktigt för första- och andragångsväljare," 28/8–22; Aftonbladet, "SD tar hem Tiktok-matchen på walkover," 19/9–22.

69. SvD, "C vill förbjuda Tiktok i riksdagen," 1/3–23.

70. Swedish Parliament, "2019/20:1669 Spionage genom appar," 24/6–20; Swedish Parliament, "Granskning av svenskarnas användning av känslig teknik," 22/11–22.

71. Forbes, "TikTok users are bleeding data," 9/11–22.

72. SVT, "Expertens varning om Tiktok: 'Aggressiv app,'" 18/8–20.

their data ending up with Chinese authorities and the surveillance of journalists.⁷³ One such concrete case, as mentioned earlier, came to light in late 2022 when Bytedance tracked journalists in both the U.S. and China.

In Italy, the death of a ten-year-old girl who participated in a viral TikTok choking challenge led to stricter requirements for TikTok's age verification, a policy that has not been enforced in practice.⁷⁴

India initially had a large userbase on TikTok, with 30 percent of the app's downloads coming from the country. That same year, however, TikTok was deemed to be a national security threat and infringing on India's sovereignty.⁷⁵ The app was subsequently banned.

In the United States, an approaching court ruling about TikTok's future has led to heated debate. The Federal Trade Commission has forced TikTok to pay \$5.7 million in fines due to the illegal gathering of data on children that are younger than 13 years old. There are already some restrictions on TikTok in the U.S., mostly concerning government employees and a smaller amount of restrictions at the state level, including in public schools. Debate has been ongoing ever since President Trump in his first term threatened to effectively ban TikTok if the company did not transfer to American ownership. When Joe Biden took office, work on proposals for a legal framework on a comprehensive legal ban has continued.⁷⁶ On March 23, 2023, TikTok's CEO Shou Zi Chew testified in front of congress, answering questions on user integrity

and data safety, as well as TikTok's relation to the Chinese Communist Party.⁷⁷

Way Forward?

Today, Sweden has been plagued by procrastination when it comes to dealing with the security risks posed by TikTok. Despite being made aware of the risks as early as 2019/2020, it took two-three years before the government advised employees to ban the app from their work devices.⁷⁸ Despite the decision, it is still possible for government agencies to cooperate with an actor that is forbidden in their own employee's workplace.

Historically, the spread of propaganda was limited to the realities of an analog world. Today's digital environment requires new protections. To combat disinformation reactively, as Swedish agencies and state organs have done, is not a sufficient strategy over the long-term. Even less so when AI makes its true breakthrough and enables even larger and more targeted influence operations.

TikTok's attempts to adapt the platform to European and Western laws distract from the more fundamental issue: Can we afford to share our data, particularly our children's data, with a data giant under the grips of a Chinese regime that Sweden's Security Services routinely label as a security threat?⁷⁹

Whether EU recommendations and laws will be enough, or even still relevant once implemented, remains an open question. The core issue concerns the individual's personal integrity and the values we are willing to defend. Laws and political processes that reflect these values must be enacted

73. Financial Times, "TikTok admits tracking FT journalist in leaks investigation," 22/12-22; The Guardian, "TikTok admits using its app to spy on reporters in efforts to track leaks," 23/12-22.

74. Reuters, "Italy tells TikTok to block users after death of young girl," 22/1-21.

75. Time Magazine, "These Are the Countries Where Twitter, Facebook and TikTok Are Banned," 18/1-22.

76. CNN, "US Senators unveil bipartisan bill empowering Biden to Ban Tik-Tok and other services," 8/3-23.

77. CNBC, "TikTok CEO to testify before House panel about app's security and ties to China," 30/1-23.

78. Sveriges Radio, "Flera partier vill stänga ute Tiktok," 7/7-20.

79. TikTok, "An update on our efforts to combat disinformation in Europe," 3/2-23; TikTok, "Setting a new standard in European data security with Project Clover," 8/3-23; The Swedish Security Service, "Säkerhetspolisens lägesbild 2022-2023," 2023.

The children's entertainment app that became a security problem

quickly. But regulations neither can nor should be the sole solution. In a democracy, it is above all shifting public opinion and individuals' actions that will create the strongest protections.

What type of soft power Sweden allows itself to be influenced by will have consequences for how we, and particularly the generation coming of age, interprets the world. It is therefore not an overstatement to say that the next generation's digital security needs should form the basis of security policy.

Staying at least as well informed as foreign dictators about the youngest members of our own society is the most basic of requirements in this context. Otherwise, the next generation will be fully justified in holding today's decision makers responsible for the consequences of the gathering and mapping of their data.

Personal data is a "goldmine" that can create better user experiences and business opportunities, as well as possibilities to connect with new and young target groups, but at what cost?

Uncertain times require not only physical, technical, and political preparedness. The culture around security is equally important. In this light, the gravest and simplest warning about TikTok and China came from the FBI:

"They do not share our values."

This should make parents, teachers, politicians, and organizations not only aware, but directly concerned about sharing their digital "gold" in the app and contributing to the Chinese Communist Party's ability to influence democratic society.