

## House Bill to Ban TikTok: Protecting National Security or Limiting Free Expression?

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The recent passage of the House bill that could potentially ban TikTok in the United States has ignited fervent debates across the digital landscape.<sup>1</sup> As the popular video-sharing app, owned by China-based company ByteDance, faces scrutiny, we find ourselves at the intersection of national security, data privacy, and the ever-elusive quest for truth in the digital age.

The bipartisan bill, which sailed through the House with a 352–65 vote, aims to pressure TikTok into parting ways with its Chinese parent company.<sup>2</sup> The underlying concern? TikTok's potential exploitation as a conduit for accessing American data and disseminating harmful information. Speaker Mike Johnson minced no words when he labeled China as America's "largest geopolitical foe," emphasizing the need to safeguard against data breaches and manipulation.<sup>3</sup>

This legislation would give TikTok a limited timeframe to sever ties with ByteDance or face being banned from US app stores.<sup>4</sup> This move could have far-reaching consequences for the app's 170 million American users and the creators who rely on it for their livelihoods.

President Joe Biden, ever the diplomat, has signaled his readiness to sign the bill if it clears both chambers of Congress.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, TikTok creators are rallying their followers with the hashtag #KeepTikTok.<sup>6</sup> They've built entire livelihoods on the app and are not about to let it fade into digital oblivion. The company argues that the bill infringes on First Amendment rights and has urged users to voice their opposition to their representatives.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, China's foreign ministry has condemned the vote as bullying.<sup>8</sup>

But here's the plot twist: Biden's campaign team is still dropping TikTok content like confetti at a virtual party. The irony? Ban the app, but keep campaigning on it.

However, TikTok is just one tile in the mosaic of social media platforms. Fueled by algorithms and artificial intelligence, these digital arenas wield immense power over our lives. Social media companies employ these algorithms for various purposes: curating content, tailoring ads, and even detecting hate speech. However, their most intriguing role lies in identifying false information—those conspiracy theories and dubious claims that proliferate like digital dandelions.

Public opinion on these algorithmic sleuths is a mixed bag. Some hail them as defenders of truth, while others view them skeptically. According to a Pew Research Center survey, 38 percent of US adults believe that using computer programs to

ferret out falsehoods is a boon for society.<sup>9</sup> However, 31 percent consider it a bad idea, and a sizable chunk remains unsure.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps these algorithms are akin to well-intentioned detectives, but their methods and biases remain under scrutiny.

In this digital dance, let us tread carefully. TikTok's fate hangs in the balance, and the algorithms continue their tireless waltz through our feeds. As we navigate this intricate web of data manipulation, may we remain vigilant, discerning, and occasionally amused by the absurdity of it all. But it also raises the question: Shouldn't we also be looking at US billionaires who are also profiting from our data and exploitation?

### Notes

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10. Rainie et al., “3. Mixed Views.”

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