



MYTHS AND DISTORTIONS FROM TIKTOK'S DEFENDERS HELP IT EVADE NEEDED ACCOUNTABILITY

By Royce Hood | September 21, 2023

TikTok poses a significant risk to American security.

WHAT IS TIKTOK?

TikTok is a **Chinese Communist Party (CCP)–controlled data-harvesting weapon** disguised as a social media app.

The winter of 2022-2023 saw a renewed bipartisan push by Congress and some state legislators to ban TikTok in the U.S. However, some defenders of the app remain in government and media, and their talking points undermine the sustained pressure necessary to finally remove the app from American smartphones. Among their objections are that TikTok's data collection operation is no worse than its U.S. counterparts and that it does not pose a unique threat to national security. Some also argue that it is being unfairly targeted because it is Chinese.



MYTH

TikTok is not a significant threat to U.S. national security.



FACT

TikTok's documented malign behavior under the control of the CCP, along with the real potential for outright sabotage, has been acknowledged as a national security threat by a bipartisan consensus of U.S. officials.

★ Data collection is not merely a personal security matter. Because the CCP has ultimate control over the data, it is a national security matter.

The CCP could use embarrassing data gleaned from keystrokes to blackmail a politician, military leader, or judge to influence their conduct.

They could also use GPS data to track personnel movements on a military base, identifying times and spaces most optimal for sabotage efforts.

And they might also use TikTok to propagate videos that support party-friendly politicians or exacerbate discord in American society.

- ★ This is a non-partisan belief held by the current administration and former administrations as well. Several senior Biden Administration officials have already expressed significant concerns about this app:

“This is a tool that is ultimately within the control of the Chinese government and it, to me, it screams out with national security concerns.” - Christopher Wray, Director of the FBI

“It is ‘extraordinary’ how adept the Chinese government is at collecting foreign data.” - Avril Haines, Director of National Intelligence

“I think this app [TikTok] is a real concern for the government.” - William Burns, Director of the CIA

“With fresh reports of private, sensitive and nonpublic data on millions of U.S. users flowing into China, the administration should be moving at the speed [that] this national security threat demands.” - Brendan Carr, Republican member of the Federal Communications Commission.



MYTH

Every social media app collects and sells data for revenue, so TikTok is no worse than Facebook or Twitter.



FACT

TikTok is unique in the quantity and sensitivity of the data it collects.

- ★ TikTok [collects all key presses in the app](#) and is capable of capturing and storing sensitive financial information such as credit card numbers. Anything typed into the app [or in its internal browser](#) is liable to be collected by TikTok, unlike Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram. This unique level of intrusion into user data is ultimately leveraged by our adversaries in the CCP.
- ★ [South Korea](#), the [Netherlands](#), and the [State of Illinois](#) have filed lawsuits against TikTok for its flagrant violation of privacy standards. In 2019, the FTC fined TikTok (then Musical.ly) [for violations of children's privacy](#).
- ★ Employees of TikTok have [used data collected by the app to attempt to gain detailed information on users](#), including journalists who report on the platform.



MYTH

Requiring TikTok to disclose how it uses personal data is just as effective as banning TikTok altogether.



FACT

TikTok operates under the control of the CCP, which prohibits TikTok from disclosing how it uses or shares personal data. Moreover, the CCP has proven time and again that it does not respect the rule of law.



MYTH

Scrutiny is applied to TikTok only because the company is Chinese/foreign and not for any substantive reasons.



FACT

This app is being closely scrutinized for several reasons. The CCP, which effectively controls TikTok through its parent company ByteDance, is authoritarian and exposes users to violations of basic personal privacy without the rights to transparency, fairness, and accountability that Americans enjoy in our country.

- ★ Provisions in China's authoritarian law [compel companies that hold data to give it to the CCP if requested](#). Moreover, those companies cannot disclose that they have handed this information over because doing so would be a violation of the National Intelligence Law (NIL) of 2017.
- ★ This is especially concerning given that the CEO of TikTok, Shou Chew, claims that the Chinese government has never asked for U.S. customer data, and if they asked, "[we would say no](#)." Chew's statement is either uninformed or misleading.
- ★ Parent company ByteDance has admitted to using TikTok data to intimidate American journalists.



MYTH

Due to mitigation efforts such as "Project Texas," TikTok user data is no longer vulnerable to malicious uses by Chinese state actors, such as harassment of U.S. journalists and surveillance of human rights activists in Hong Kong.



FACT

Though they are steps in the right direction, recent efforts such as "Project Texas" have failed to create a reliable firewall between American user data and the CCP.

- ★ Under the arrangement with the Biden Administration, "Project Texas" is meant to separate U.S. user data from China by physically moving TikTok's data storage hardware to the continental U.S. However, [former executives claim that Chinese engineers still have access](#) and are actively using the app as an implement to spread propaganda.
- ★ TikTok employees have been accused by outlets such as Forbes of [explicitly using the app in an attempt to track journalists](#) and accused whistleblowers within the company to target them for retaliation. The app has also [been used against dissidents in Hong Kong](#).

