

# [***TikTok Parent ByteDance s Sensitive Words Tool Monitors Discussion Of China, Trump, Uyghurs***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:68TT-13P1-JBCM-F3TP-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Length:** 2569 words

**Byline:** Alexandra S. Levine, Forbes Staff

**Highlight:** ByteDance appears to be using word lists to detect or suppress content about everything from TikTok rival YouTube to marginalized Uyghurs to 2024 presidential candidate Donald Trump.

**Body**

**A moderation system run by ByteDance staff in China uses word lists to detect or suppress content about everything from TikTok rival YouTube to marginalized Uyghurs to 2024 presidential candidate Donald Trump. Even though more than 50 lists have TikTok in their name, TikTok denied that the lists detailed in this story had ever been applied to its platform.**

**Like many social media companies,**TikTok s parent company ByteDance maintains a library of vocabulary lists that dictate what users of its most popular platforms can and cannot see. But the Chinese giant s glossary appears to extend well beyond standard moderation blocklists that typically focus on things like hate speech, child safety and terrorism,**Forbes**has learned. Internal company records show that posts about China s government, U.S.-China trade, former president and 2024 candidate Donald Trump, persecuted minority ethnic group Uyghurs and even some of TikTok s American competitors are subject to monitoring and in some cases, suppression by ByteDance.

Lists in the ByteDance tool that is tracking sensitive words mentioned across its platforms have titles like:

**TikTok sensitive person themed vocabulary**

**Trump Directed Prohibited Words**

**Putin Directed Prohibited Words**

**TikTok Japanese Comments Suppress Words**

**TikTok audio sensitive words in Tibet region**

**Special prohibited words for Xi and Peng**

**Sensitive words in Douyin videos in Xinjiang**

**Theming Strategies of Uyghur-Han Couples**

**Thematic Strategy for China s Strategic Policy**

**Local life- Taiwan independence & Hong Kong**

**YouTube Domestic Surveillance**

**Company Product Negative Sensitive Vocabulary**

**And: TikTok government affairs media topic vocabulary.**

An internal guide to the tool which appears to be written by China-based employees of ByteDance and its Beijing subsidiary Jiyun Hudong describes its global core vocabulary of common bottom-line sensitive words with high risk, as well as its global commonly used thesaurus containing fully classified illegal vocabulary. The document says the system was built in 2017 to help detect, evaluate and recall these wordsacross ByteDance productsbecause they may bring risks to the company s safety, reputation and revenue.

The business side shall prevail, it says.

**Forbes** found more than 50 lists in the ByteDance tool with the word TikTok or U.S. in the title, and internal materials show that the tool was accessed by TikTok employees in the last year. Other lists explicitly reference TikTok s Chinese counterpart Douyin, as well as ByteDance products Lark, Toutiao and Resso.

TikTok spokesperson Jamie Favazza suggested the extensive materials obtained by**Forbes**could be significantly outdated or incomplete and said none of the word lists identified by**Forbes**in this story are currently or have ever been used on TikTok. Asked why these lists have TikTok or US in their names if they were never used on the platform, Favazza said I can not speculate on the list titles without**Forbes**turning over documents.

"TikTok and Douyin are different apps, in different markets, with separate content policies and source code, she said in a statement. These apps use separate keyword platforms and keyword lists that are managed by separate teams." ByteDance and TikTok s sensitive keywords system which until recently shared the same name was split in 2019, according to Favazza, who said TikTok s version of the tool has been operated separately ever since.

ByteDance did not respond to questions about whether the word lists apply to Douyin or ByteDance s other products which includeLemon8andCapCut, apps that have recently exploded in popularity in the U.S. ByteDance also did not respond to repeated questions about the meaning of lists like Trump Directed Prohibited Words, Theming Strategies of Uyghur-Han Couples YouTube Domestic Surveillance and Thematic Strategy for China s Strategic Policy, or who created them and how they re being used.

Experts told Forbes it s nearly impossible to guarantee Douyin s restrictive settings are switched off for TikTok.

Spokesperson Jennifer Banks said only that "Jiyun Hudong, which is a subsidiary of Douyin Information Service Co., Ltd., manages operations in relation to our China platforms' content moderation, including that of Douyin's. Teams who manage moderation for China-only platforms and non-China platforms are different and separate; employed by different entities; and have separate tools for moderation."

Dozens of current and former TikTok and ByteDance employees have told**Forbes**that any purported separation between the two companies is largely cosmetic. And hundreds of documents reviewed by**Forbes**show a lack of functional separation internally in access to information, user data and tools including their sensitive keyword systems. Along with TikTok employees having access to the ByteDance tool in the last year, documents also show that ByteDance employees in China are among those who ve managed the TikTok tool. (Favazza said TikTok could not verify whether any TikTok employees had accessed the tool without knowing their names.)

A2021 Citizen Lab reportalso found that TikTok and Douyin share many parts of their source code, built on a common base and tweaked based on the market. Some of these customizations can be turned on or off in different locations, according to the report, but experts told**Forbes**it s nearly impossible to guarantee Douyin s restrictive settings are switched off for TikTok.

**Got a tip about TikTok or ByteDance? Reach out securely to the author, Alexandra S. Levine, on Signal/WhatsApp at (310) 526 1242, or email her at** [***alevine@forbes.com***](mailto:alevine@forbes.com)

Records show the moderation tools and other internal programs also collect data on the hit rate of sensitive words, including information about U.S. users posting them. One document mentioning TikTok and other ByteDance products describes a recent upgrade that integrated the moderation system with a new text detection service, making it easier to track and analyze hit records of sensitive words in real-time. (At least one of the people running that project was an engineer in Beijing.) Favazza, the TikTok spokesperson, said that tracking data on hits of sensitive or prohibited words simply helps us understand performance and that access is restricted.

The Chinese government has used social media to target people in the U.S. who ve spoken out online against the Chinese Communist Party, including by commemorating the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing. The Justice Department in Aprilchargeddozens of police officers tied to the Chinese government with doing just that.

Yes, Facebook and Google all do the same things to protect their global assets... but they're not beholden to the CIA or the NSA. <footer>William Evanina, former head of counterintelligence for the U.S. government</footer>

The revelation about ByteDance s sensitive words tool comes a month after TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew testified for the first time before Congress, attempting to reassure lawmakers that the ByteDance subsidiary can effectively cordon off U.S. data from China and that what Americans see on the platform is not subject to the whims of the Chinese regime. Asked repeatedly about Beijing s ability to influence what is (or isn t) shown on TikTok, including content unfavorable to the party, Chew denied that this happens.

We do not promote or remove content at the request of the Chinese government, he told the Republican leader of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers. It is our commitment that we will keep this free from any manipulation by any government.

**Forbes**reportinghas revealedextensive overlap between Chinese state media and ByteDance and TikTok employees, anduncoveredhow Chinese state media has already used TikTok to attempt to influence Americans opinions about U.S. ***politics***. (TikTok began adding labels to state-affiliated mediathis year.) And the Citizen Lab report, which Chewcitedin his congressional testimony to allay fears about TikTok s ties to China, in fact found there was insufficient evidence to prove or disprove that TikTok employs political censorship.

**The business side shall prevail**

While some of the ByteDance word list titles viewed by**Forbes**directly cite TikTok, and others explicitly mention Douyin which is heavily censored by the Chinese government many more don t reference either. (Some of those ambiguous lists appear to relate to the U.S., like Trump Directed Prohibited Words and NBA Copyright Glossary. ) ByteDance did not answer repeated questions about how lists that don t differentiate between TikTok and Douyin are applied.

One guide to the ByteDance tool describes its core redline vocabulary that includes language like six four words, a seeming reference to 6/4 or June 4, the date of the 1989 violence in Tiananmen Square. Documents show that other lists in the ByteDance words tool are concerned with hot-button geopolitical issues including Ukraine and Russia, discussion of independence in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and speech in Tibet ( TikTok audio sensitive words in Tibet region ). Several more deal with language critical of ByteDance products; mentions of TikTok competitors; and sensitive or forbidden references to the Uyghur minority that has been thevictimofChinese genocide.

The glossary is sensitive information and there is a risk of leakage. <footer>Internal ByteDance document</footer>

The list titled Theming Strategies of Uyghur-Han Couples, for example, appears to focus on marriages or relationships between Uyghurs and Han Chinese, the country s ethnic majority. A recenthuman rights reportshowed a rise in forced marriages between Uyghur women and Han men, calling these largely coerced partnerships forms of gender-based crimes that violate international human rights standards and further the ongoing genocide. The report found content of Uyghur-Han weddings on Douyin, and a**Forbes**search of Uyghur-Han on TikTok pulled up similar videos of what appear to be happy celebrations. Favazza, the TikTok spokesperson, said this is not a TikTok list and I can't speculate if it exists for other ByteDance apps.

Employees could plug lists of words, or specific text and phrases, into a detection tool that could run a search to check whether the query contains sensitive words or not so that some good results are banned, thus can t be recalled, according to one internal guide describing how the tool could be used for TikTok.

Another document outlines a number of ways the system can deal with sensitive words : Some are described as must kill and hit directly off the shelf. Other sensitive terms picked up by the tool would be made visible only to the poster, prohibited from further sharing or suppressed in other ways, it says.

Access to the ByteDance tool, and the materials contained in it, appeared to be tightly controlled by nearly two dozen ByteDance and Jiyun Hudong employees in China, according to the guide. The glossary is sensitive information, it says, and there is a risk of leakage.

Favazza, the TikTok spokesperson, said the tool and word lists that apply to TikTok, and access to them, is controlled by TikTok s trust and safety team. TikTok s lists are restricted and permissions based, and before a keyword can be added to a list for the U.S. TikTok's policy requires it to be submitted for review and approval by an approved TikTok U.S. team member, she said.

**Just the way they do business**

Most major social media platforms, including TikTok s fiercest rivals in the U.S., have policies and tools aimed at filtering out content and language that is violent, vulgar or illegal. Like those companies, some TikTok word lists are geared toward protecting users from seeing things like self-harm or suicide content and other dangerous material.

Chew, the TikTok CEO, has also pointed out other commonalities, telling lawmakers at last month s hearing that the potential security, privacy [and] content manipulation concerns raised about TikTok are really not unique to us.

Ownership is not at the core of addressing these concerns, he added.

We all know that social media is public, but we forget that what you say can have consequences. <footer>Glenn Gerstell, former NSA general counsel</footer>

But William Evanina, the former head of counterintelligence for the U.S. government, told**Forbes** TikTok s Chinese ownership is precisely the issue. The difference stateside is that NSA doesn't work with Google, and CIA doesn't work with Microsoft, Evanina gave as an analogy. U.S. law enforcement cannot access or search companies user data without a warrant, subpoena or court order, and federal agencies can t give them a glossary of words to track on their platforms, he explained. In China on the other hand, where there is little separation between the corporate world and government, officials can do so without jumping through legal hoops: This is just the way they do business, he said.

The difference is the fundamental issue of ByteDance being subservient to the government and the Ministry of State Security, Evanina told**Forbes**. Yes, Facebook and Google all do the same things to protect their global assets on their platforms, but they're not beholden to the CIA or the NSA. And the NSA and CIA are not giving Facebook this book.

Beyond free speech concerns, experts told**Forbes** that from a cybersecurity perspective, one danger of ByteDance s monitoring system is its potential to keep track of how often specific words come up, who said or clicked them, where those people are located and who else follows them. In China, where laws mandate that companies turn over information to the government if asked, ByteDance could be required to share that sensitive data with party leaders, experts explained whether the activity came from inside China, the U.S. or another country. (TikTok has said that it has not been asked to share user data with the Chinese government, and that it would not do so if asked.)

This listing of words is proof-positive that there are specific things that they are concerned about and they want to monitor who was saying them, when and how often, Evanina said of the tool.

Former National Security Agency general counsel Glenn Gerstell added that this is an inherent risk whenever anyone speaks out against China online, whether that criticism can be found on TikTok or in a Google search. You'd be taking some risks that you'd come to the attention of [the] Ministry of State Security if you started criticizing President Xi and talking about Tiananmen Square, he told**Forbes**, adding that there s some naivete about this on the part of the public.

We all know that social media is public, but we forget that what you say can have consequences, he said. What if there was a Ministry of State Security version of Google that just looked throughout the web and kept track of every time someone mentioned Tiananmen Square?

If you're doing something out in public, meaning on a public-facing website, not only are you subject to scrutiny by the app itself, but you are also subject to scrutiny beyond the control of the app by anybody who has access to the public web, he added. And they could do whatever they please in tracking you.

**Emily Baker-White contributed reporting.**

**This story has been updated with further comment from TikTok.**

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