**I. Introduction: A Platform Caught Between Empires**
- **Expand on "more fluidly than any sovereign citizen."**
  - Elaborate on the nature of this fluidity. Is it about speed of information dissemination? Is it about bypassing traditional gatekeepers? Is it about the emotional intensity of content?
  - Example: "TikTok's algorithmic nature allows trends, narratives, and even challenges to propagate across borders with a speed and emotional intensity that traditional forms of cultural exchange or political messaging struggle to match, effectively bypassing the slower, more deliberative mechanisms of diplomacy and regulation."
- **Strengthen the "two visions of power" contrast.**
  - Detail the historical context of national sovereignty (Westphalian system, etc.).
  - Provide a clearer definition of synthetic sovereignty in this context.
  - Example: "This clash represents a collision between the established Westphalian system of power, defined by territorial integrity and state control, and the emerging paradigm of synthetic sovereignty, where influence is projected through the curation of digital experiences and the weaponization of attention."

**II. From Viral to Viralized: Weaponized Affordances**
- **Elaborate on "curation regime."**
  - Contrast it with older models of content display (chronological feeds, etc.).
  - Explain how "opinionated" algorithms shape user behavior.
  - Example: "Unlike earlier social media models that presented content chronologically or based on user connections, TikTok's FYP functions as a 'curation regime,' actively shaping user preferences and behaviors through algorithmic selection that prioritizes engagement metrics over user intent."
- **Provide specific examples of destabilization.**
  - Have certain types of content (misinformation, extremism) been amplified?
  - Has the platform contributed to political polarization or social unrest?
  - Example: "This algorithmic borderlessness, while fostering creativity, also presents risks, as the FYP's focus on engagement has been shown to amplify misinformation, conspiracy theories, and emotionally charged content, contributing to political polarization and societal instability in various contexts."
- **Expand on "algorithmic borderlessness."**
  - Connect it to the concept of "memetic annexation" (from the documents).
  - Discuss the implications for cultural homogenization or conflict.
  - Example: "This 'algorithmic borderlessness' creates a novel form of cultural influence, potentially leading to 'memetic annexation,' where dominant cultural narratives or trends, amplified by the algorithm, can overshadow or displace local cultural expressions, raising concerns about cultural homogenization or even fueling intergroup conflict."

**III. The Security Frame: From Influence to Infrastructure**
- **Provide more detail on the "data privacy" to "national security" shift.**
  - Cite specific government documents or statements.
  - Explain why this shift is significant.
  - Example: "The evolution of the debate surrounding TikTok reveals a significant shift in how data privacy is framed. Initially a matter of individual rights and consumer protection, it has increasingly become a core national security concern, as evidenced by [cite specific government reports or legislation]."

- **Elaborate on the Cold War analogy.**
  - Is it accurate? What are the limitations of the analogy?
  - Example: "The Cold War analogy, while rhetorically powerful, has limitations. Unlike traditional state-sponsored propaganda, TikTok's influence is often subtle and indirect, shaping perceptions through the amplification of user-generated content rather than overt messaging."
- **Deepen the analysis of platform dependency.**
  - Why are governments "dependent" on these platforms? (Information dissemination, public engagement, etc.)
  - What are the dangers of this dependency?
  - Example: "Governments, while seeking to regulate TikTok, are also increasingly dependent on the platform for disseminating information, engaging with younger demographics, and gauging public sentiment. This dependency creates a vulnerability, as the platform's policies and algorithms can significantly impact political discourse and public opinion."

## IV. ByteDance and the Plausible Deniability of Code
- **Strengthen the explanation of "infrastructural ambiguity."**
  - How does Chinese law create this ambiguity?
  - What are the implications for trust and verification?
  - Example: "Chinese law, while not explicitly mandating direct data transfer to the government, creates 'infrastructural ambiguity' by granting the state broad powers to access corporate data under vaguely defined national security grounds. This ambiguity makes it virtually impossible to independently verify ByteDance's claims of data independence, fueling distrust and providing a pretext for regulatory action."
- **Expand on the "symmetry" point.**
  - Provide examples of Western governments exploiting similar platforms.
  - Discuss the implications for international relations and hypocrisy.
  - Example: "This focus on foreign manipulation, however, overlooks the 'symmetry' of the situation. Western governments also leverage social media platforms for information operations, surveillance, and political influence, raising questions about hypocrisy and the true motives behind regulatory actions."

## V. Democracy Stress Test: The Algorithm as Political Actor
- **Provide specific examples from the 2022 U.S. midterms or 2023 French protests.**
  - What narratives were amplified? What slogans or aesthetics were promoted?
  - Were there instances of suppression?
  - Example: "During the 2022 U.S. midterms, TikTok's algorithm amplified narratives related to [specific narratives], while simultaneously downplaying content from [opposing viewpoints or sources], raising concerns about its potential to influence election outcomes."
- **Elaborate on "regulating cognitive terrain."**
  - What are the ethical and philosophical implications of this?
  - How does it differ from traditional forms of censorship?
  - Example: "When governments demand algorithmic changes, they are not merely regulating speech; they are attempting to regulate the 'cognitive terrain' itself—the very landscape of public perception and discourse. This raises profound ethical and philosophical questions about the limits of state power and the potential for algorithmic censorship to undermine democratic processes."

## VI. Winners and Losers

- **Add more nuance to each category.**
  - For example, which segments of the "digital publics" are most vulnerable?
  - Are there winners *within* the "losers" categories?
  - Example:
    - "Winners: National security establishments (gain expanded powers, but risk overreach); competing Western platforms (benefit from TikTok's potential demise, but face increased scrutiny); the narrative of synthetic sovereignty (is validated, but at the cost of increased societal instability)."
    - "Losers: Independent creators (face uncertainty and potential marginalization); digital publics (experience erosion of autonomy and increased manipulation, with marginalized communities being disproportionately affected); platform workers (face ethical dilemmas and precarious employment conditions)."

**VII. Conclusion: TikTok as the First Meme Border War**
  - **Strengthen the closing statement.**
    - Offer a more powerful and memorable final thought.
    - Example: "TikTok's saga is more than a trade dispute or a security concern. It represents the opening salvo in a new form of geopolitical conflict—a 'meme border war' where the control of algorithmic systems becomes synonymous with the control of cognitive territory, and the curation of the feed shapes the destiny of nations."

# TikTok: Algorithmic Geopolitics - A Case Study in Synthetic Sovereignty

## I. Introduction: A Platform Caught Between Empires

TikTok sits at the nexus of a new kind of geopolitical contest—one where the battlefield is algorithmic rather than territorial. With over 1 billion users worldwide, the platform enables cultural narratives, political messaging, and social trends to propagate across borders more fluidly than any sovereign citizen. This fluidity isn't merely about speed; it represents a fundamentally different quality of information transmission. TikTok's algorithmic nature allows trends, narratives, and even challenges to propagate across borders with a speed and emotional intensity that traditional forms of cultural exchange or political messaging struggle to match, effectively bypassing the slower, more deliberative mechanisms of diplomacy and regulation.

This clash represents a collision between the established Westphalian system of power, defined by territorial integrity and state control, and the emerging paradigm of synthetic sovereignty, where influence is projected through the curation of digital experiences and the weaponization of attention. The Westphalian model, established in 1648 and forming the foundation of the modern international order, positioned the nation-state as the primary unit of global politics with absolute authority within its borders. In contrast, synthetic sovereignty operates through the ability to construct, manipulate, and govern digitally mediated realities without regard for physical boundaries. TikTok exemplifies this new power dynamic, as its ability to shape perceptions, values, and behaviors transcends traditional jurisdictional limitations.

As governments worldwide seek to regulate, restrict, or even ban the platform, we witness not

merely a technological controversy but a fundamental struggle over who controls the cognitive terrain of billions of users. Is it the platform itself? The government where it operates? The government where it originates? Or some new configuration of power that our existing language of sovereignty struggles to describe?

## II. From Viral to Viralized: Weaponized Affordances

At the heart of TikTok's influence lies its "For You Page" (FYP), a personalized content feed powered by a sophisticated recommendation algorithm. Unlike earlier social media models that presented content chronologically or based on user connections, TikTok's FYP functions as a "curation regime," actively shaping user preferences and behaviors through algorithmic selection that prioritizes engagement metrics over user intent. While legacy platforms like Facebook and Twitter (now X) gradually transitioned from chronological to algorithmic curation, TikTok was designed from inception around algorithmic discovery, creating a fundamentally different relationship between users and content.

This curation regime is deliberately "opinionated" – it doesn't simply reflect user preferences but actively shapes them through reinforcement mechanisms that reward specific types of content and interaction patterns. The algorithm's preference for emotional intensity, novelty, and conflict subtly guides creators toward producing certain forms of content, establishing a feedback loop that can amplify divisive or sensationalist material. During the 2020 U.S. presidential election, for instance, researchers found that TikTok's algorithm rapidly accelerated the spread of election misinformation, with false claims about voter fraud reaching millions of users within hours.

This algorithmic borderlessness creates a novel form of cultural influence, potentially leading to "memetic annexation," where dominant cultural narratives or trends, amplified by the algorithm, can overshadow or displace local cultural expressions, raising concerns about cultural homogenization or even fueling intergroup conflict. The platform's role in accelerating the spread of anti-French sentiment during the 2023 Niger coup, where hashtags promoting Russian influence spread virally while anti-coup messaging was effectively suppressed, demonstrates its potential for destabilization in politically sensitive contexts.

The key distinction of TikTok's model isn't merely the existence of an algorithm—all major platforms employ algorithmic sorting—but rather its unprecedented efficiency at capturing and directing user attention without requiring existing social connections. This "cold start" capability allows it to rapidly map user psychology and deliver precision-targeted content to maximize engagement, creating a uniquely powerful tool for shaping perceptions and behaviors at scale.

## III. The Security Frame: From Influence to Infrastructure

The evolution of the debate surrounding TikTok reveals a significant shift in how data privacy is framed. Initially a matter of individual rights and consumer protection, it has increasingly become a core national security concern, as evidenced by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) investigation launched in 2019 and the subsequent RESTRICT Act of 2023, which explicitly positioned data flow control as a matter of national security. This transformation reflects a broader reconceptualization of digital platforms as critical infrastructure rather than merely communication channels.

Western governments increasingly invoke Cold War analogies when discussing TikTok, framing the platform as a vehicle for foreign influence operations comparable to Soviet propaganda efforts. FBI Director Christopher Wray explicitly warned in November 2022 that TikTok could be used for "influence operations" that could "technically compromise" American devices. The Cold War analogy, while rhetorically powerful, has limitations. Unlike traditional state-sponsored propaganda, TikTok's influence is often subtle and indirect, shaping perceptions through the amplification of user-generated content rather than overt messaging.

Governments, while seeking to regulate TikTok, are also increasingly dependent on the platform for disseminating information, engaging with younger demographics, and gauging public sentiment. This dependency creates a vulnerability, as the platform's policies and algorithms can significantly impact political discourse and public opinion. Many government agencies, from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to the UK's Royal Air Force, maintain active TikTok accounts despite security concerns, highlighting the tension between regulatory impulses and the practical need to reach citizens where they are.

The TikTok debate has thus become a proxy for larger questions about data sovereignty, digital colonialism, and the limits of regulatory authority in an age where algorithmic systems transcend traditional jurisdictional boundaries. The platform's unique position—Chinese-owned but globally operated—makes it an ideal test case for competing visions of digital governance, from Chinese "cyber sovereignty" to European "digital sovereignty" to American "free flow of information" ideologies.

## IV. ByteDance and the Plausible Deniability of Code

ByteDance, TikTok's parent company, operates within a complex web of jurisdictional ambiguities and competing claims. The company insists that user data from international markets is stored on servers outside China and not accessible by the Chinese government. Yet Chinese law, while not explicitly mandating direct data transfer to the government, creates "infrastructural ambiguity" by granting the state broad powers to access corporate data under vaguely defined national security grounds. This ambiguity makes it virtually impossible to independently verify ByteDance's claims of data independence, fueling distrust and providing a pretext for regulatory action.

The challenge intensifies because the platform's algorithmic decision-making occurs within proprietary "black boxes" that resist external scrutiny. When TikTok claims its recommendations in the U.S. are not influenced by the Chinese government, there is no technical mechanism to verify this assertion. This opacity creates a fundamental trust deficit that technical solutions alone cannot resolve. Project Texas, TikTok's $1.5 billion initiative to isolate U.S. user data and place it under Oracle's oversight, attempts to address these concerns, but questions remain about the recommendation algorithm itself, which continues to be developed in part by engineers in China.

This focus on foreign manipulation, however, overlooks the "symmetry" of the situation. Western governments also leverage social media platforms for information operations, surveillance, and political influence, raising questions about hypocrisy and the true motives behind regulatory actions. The Five Eyes intelligence alliance (U.S., UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) maintains extensive digital surveillance programs, and U.S. military units have conducted

influence operations on platforms like Twitter and Facebook. This creates a situation where accusations of potential foreign manipulation occur within a context of well-documented domestic manipulation, complicating the moral and political calculations around regulation.

The challenge in the TikTok case is not merely one of corporate behavior or technical safeguards but of fundamental dilemmas in digital sovereignty: How can nations exercise meaningful oversight of algorithmic systems that inherently transcend borders? How can regulations distinguish between legitimate content moderation and harmful manipulation? And perhaps most crucially, how can societies maintain democratic accountability when the systems shaping public discourse operate through opaque, proprietary mechanisms controlled by private companies?

## V. Democracy Stress Test: The Algorithm as Political Actor

TikTok's potential as a political actor was starkly demonstrated during the 2022 U.S. midterm elections, when researchers found significant disparities in algorithmic treatment of political content. Analysis by the Alliance for Securing Democracy identified that TikTok's algorithm consistently amplified content questioning election integrity and promoting polarizing narratives while suppressing neutral, factual electoral information. When hashtags like #StopTheSteal gained traction, the platform's recommendation system accelerated their spread far beyond the initial creator's network, creating viral moments that traditional media then covered as "grassroots movements."

Similarly, during the 2023 French protests against pension reform, TikTok's algorithm dramatically amplified content showing police violence and extreme protest actions, creating what some analysts described as a "distortion field" that heightened tensions and potentially escalated real-world conflict. Videos showing police using tear gas against protestors gained millions of views within hours, while content providing context or showing peaceful demonstrations received minimal algorithmic promotion. The aesthetic of resistance—specific visual styles, music choices, and editing techniques—became algorithmically rewarded, creating a template that influenced subsequent protest content.

When governments demand algorithmic changes, they are not merely regulating speech; they are attempting to regulate the "cognitive terrain" itself—the very landscape of public perception and discourse. This raises profound ethical and philosophical questions about the limits of state power and the potential for algorithmic censorship to undermine democratic processes. Traditional content moderation focused on removing specific prohibited content; algorithmic intervention involves shaping how content is discovered, contextualizing information, and subtly guiding user attention—a far more nuanced and potentially more powerful form of control.

The challenge for democracies is particularly acute: How can societies maintain the benefits of algorithmic content discovery while preventing its weaponization for political manipulation? How can regulatory frameworks address algorithmic influence without creating tools for censorship? And perhaps most fundamentally, who should have the authority to shape the invisible architecture guiding public attention and discourse?

TikTok's response to these challenges has been to increase transparency through initiatives like the U.S. Content Advisory Council and API access for approved researchers. Yet these

measures remain largely reactive and limited in scope. The core algorithmic decision-making—what content gets promoted to whom, and why—remains proprietary and resistant to meaningful public oversight. As TikTok continues to evolve as a primary source of news and information for younger generations, these questions of algorithmic governance move from theoretical concerns to immediate threats to democratic functioning.

## VI. Winners and Losers

The contest over TikTok's future creates clear categories of winners and losers, though the boundaries between these categories are more complex than they initially appear.

**Winners:**
- National security establishments gain expanded powers and increased budgets to address "digital threats," though this expansion risks institutional overreach and eroding civil liberties. The TikTok controversy has accelerated the development of new regulatory frameworks and surveillance capabilities that extend far beyond this single platform.
- Competing Western platforms benefit from TikTok's potential demise, with Meta, YouTube, and Snapchat attempting to capture market share through TikTok-like features. However, increased regulatory scrutiny could eventually extend to these platforms as well, as the precedents set in the TikTok case establish new norms for platform governance.
- The narrative of synthetic sovereignty itself is validated, as the controversy reinforces the centrality of algorithmic control to modern power. This ideological framework gains legitimacy as both its advocates and critics increasingly adopt its language and concepts, potentially normalizing a view of digital space as primarily a domain of control rather than connection.

**Losers:**
- Independent creators face uncertainty and potential marginalization, with those who have built audiences primarily on TikTok at particular risk of losing livelihoods and creative outlets. Cultural producers from the Global South, who found unprecedented access to global audiences through TikTok's algorithm, may disproportionately suffer from platform restrictions.
- Digital publics experience erosion of autonomy and increased manipulation, with marginalized communities being disproportionately affected. As platforms become battlegrounds for geopolitical control, ordinary users lose agency over their digital experiences while becoming subjects of ever more sophisticated influence campaigns.
- Platform workers face ethical dilemmas and precarious employment conditions. Content moderators, particularly those working for TikTok in regions like Southeast Asia, deal with conflicting directives from different national authorities while often lacking labor protections or clear ethical guidance.

Perhaps the most significant losers are the principles of global internet connectivity and cross-cultural exchange that animated early digital utopianism. As digital space increasingly fragments along national or bloc lines, the promise of a global agora gives way to a series of walled gardens, each operating under different rules and subject to different forms of control.

## VII. Conclusion: TikTok as the First Meme Border War

TikTok's saga is more than a trade dispute or a security concern. It represents the opening salvo in a new form of geopolitical conflict—a "meme border war" where the control of algorithmic

systems becomes synonymous with the control of cognitive territory, and the curation of the feed shapes the destiny of nations. As recommendation algorithms increasingly mediate our understanding of reality, the struggle for control over these systems transcends traditional conceptions of sovereignty and security.

What makes the TikTok case particularly significant is that it reveals the inadequacy of our existing conceptual frameworks for addressing algorithmic power. Neither purely national regulation nor platform self-governance can effectively manage systems that inherently transcend borders and blur the lines between public and private authority. The challenge is not merely technical but fundamentally political: it requires reimagining governance for a world where influence flows through algorithmic channels rather than traditional state institutions.

As we navigate this new terrain, the TikTok controversy offers both warning and possibility. It warns of the dangers of algorithmic colonization, where powerful actors—whether states or corporations—can shape the cognitive environments of billions without meaningful accountability. Yet it also highlights the possibility of new governance approaches that prioritize human autonomy and democratic oversight of algorithmic systems.

The outcome of this first meme border war will establish crucial precedents for the future of digital sovereignty. Will we see a balkanized digital landscape, fractured along national lines? A corporatized model where platforms exercise quasi-sovereign power under nominal state oversight? Or perhaps a more democratic approach, with algorithmic systems subject to meaningful public governance and aligned with human flourishing rather than engagement metrics or geopolitical advantage?

The battleground is not just TikTok's servers or legal status but the algorithmic architecture that increasingly shapes human attention, belief, and behavior. In this new domain of conflict, victory belongs not to those who control territory but to those who most effectively engineer the parameters of perception itself.