TikTok blocks 95% of content for users in Russia

As the last global social media platform operating in Russia, these unprecedented and unannounced content restrictions affecting 55 million users ends the era of free internet in Russia at a pivotal point in the war in Ukraine, finds Tracking Exposed.

- For immediate release -

(Paris) Tuesday March 15 2022

Algorithmic investigation experts Tracking Exposed have exclusively uncovered that TikTok has blocked an estimated 95% of content previously available to its 55 million users in Russia.
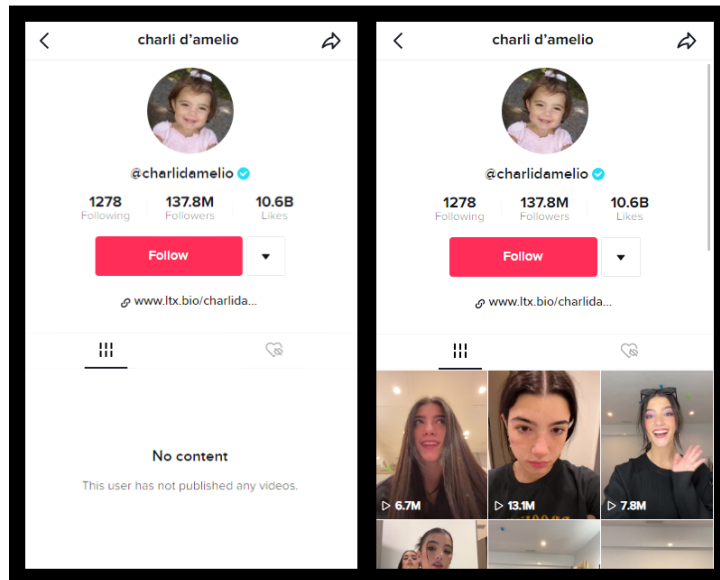
The content is restricted at the *application layer* rather than the *transport layer*, which requires the direct involvement of TikTok. It is the first time a global social media platform has restricted access to content at this scale.

TikTok users in Russia can no longer see content on accounts run by foreign media such as the BBC, or from Tiktok's biggest stars like Charlie d'Amelio. When a user in Russia tries to access the accounts or posts from their favorite TikTokers based outside Russia they are met with an empty account (see next page for an image).

TikTok had announced that it would not allow new content uploads in response to the Russian law that made spreading "fake news" about the Russian army a crime punishable by 15 years in prison, but TikTok did *not* announce that it has banned all foreign accounts for users in Russia.

TikTok as seen from Russia

TikTok as seen from the rest of the World

The account of TikTok's most-followed user, Charlie D'Amelio as seen from Russia and the rest of the world using Tracking Exposed's tools on March 15

Tracking Exposed's data - part of a detailed report into TikTok's activities in Russia released today - also reveals that a loophole to get around the upload ban is being exploited by a coordinated network of accounts posting pro-war propaganda.

"The Russian Splinternet"

TikTok's move is notable because it significantly advances the "splinternet" - a term used to describe the fragmentation of the internet as a result of censorship. This time, it is not Russian ISPs who are banning content (as they did with Facebook and Twitter) but TikTok that is implementing the restriction.

At the time of release TikTok had not clarified why this is happening.

[Salvatore Romano](#), Head of Research at [Tracking Exposed](#) comments:

> *"The effect of TikTok's changes since the war began is that Russian people are deprived of a global perspective on Russia's actions in Ukraine, and can only*

*see content heavily weighted towards Kremlin-approved information. This
makes it less likely that public opinion in Russia will become critical of the war.*

*As TikTok is the last non Russian-owned global social media platform in Russia,
TikTok should clarify its content policy in Russia and provide data access to
researchers to allow for public scrutiny on how its decisions are impacting the
Ukraine-Russia war."*

[Marc Faddoul](), co-director of [Tracking Exposed]() comments:

*"Before the war, the Russian internet landscape was unique in that Russian
services like VKontakte and Yandex were able to flourish, while Facebook or
Google remained uncensored and freely accessible.*

*The era of the free internet in Russia just came to a sudden end. Within a week,
Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were blocked. TikTok, the only global platform
still available in Russia, is effectively turning into a propaganda channel for the
Kremlin. Russia seems to be moving toward the Chinese model of internet
censorship."*

[Claudio Agosti](), founder and co-director of [Tracking Exposed]() comments:

*"A truly free internet has never been more important. This war is the latest
example of the devastating real world consequences of the policy decisions of
social platforms. Social media users around the world will continue to be
impacted by algorithms and content restrictions until we have transparency and
accountability. We are stepping up Tracking Exposed investigations and looking
for collaborators, analysts, funders and volunteers to help us scale this
important work."*

- ENDS -

Notes to Editors

About the report

The full report, *Tracking Exposed Special Report: Content Restriction in Russia,* contains detailed results and methodology, in addition to images and linked sources.

The report is available at:
https://tiktok.tracking.exposed/reports/tiktok-russia-march15.pdf

About Tracking Exposed

Tracking Exposed is a European non-profit organization defending digital rights through algorithmic investigations.

Since 2016 Tracking Exposed has been pioneering new methodologies to scrutinize the most influential recommender systems, such as those of YouTube, Facebook, Amazon, PornHub and TikTok. The code is released as free software, enabling anyone to use, extend or review it.

Tracking Exposed's infrastructure and methodologies have been validated in several peer-reviewed publications, and the works of the team have received coverage in major media outlets. Some of its reports have been cited in a United Nations report, a house testimony and a US Congress official letter to YouTube's CEO.

Tracking Exposed is also developing YouChoose.ai, an alternative recommendation system for YouTube which empowers users and content creators.

Tracking Exposed was born in Italy and its legal nonprofit is registered in France. The organization is funded through various grants and foundations, including from the European Commission, the Mozilla Foundation and Reset.tech.

Contact

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