

Intersections between the internet, geopolitics, and digital coloniality.

"Digital Misdirection: How TikTok Shapes Public Attention Away from Global Injustice"

American social media platforms provide a space where users can voice their opinions and concerns on various issues. These platforms often emphasize freedom of speech, allowing people to express themselves freely, as long as their content complies with legal standards. However, while users are permitted to share a wide range of views, certain types of content, including religious or ideologically driven posts, are sometimes restricted or removed. This selective enforcement raises questions about whether these platforms truly uphold free expression or impose hidden biases in their moderation policies.

American Websites such as TikTok advice people to be themselves and push an agenda where people create a platform where they can express themselves as they please. This freedom of expression does however come with limitations and restrictions which are usually things that are either illegal or socially unacceptable such as racism, slurs and bullying. People do have to comply with the rules and regulations that the app comes with and avoid positing content that sensitive such as nudity, images that promote violent action or activities and election interference when there is an election going on in events such as presidency elections. However, There are certain things that the platform sensors when it does not align with their beliefs even though they do promote free speech and sense of self, The U.S. government and social media platforms like TikTok do impose certain restrictions on content, even if it doesn't explicitly violate community guidelines. This practice is often justified under national security, public safety, or misinformation policies, but critics argue it amounts to censorship or information control.

TikTok shadow bans certain topics on their platform limiting the reach of certain topics and amplifying other topics, this often in a way shape user exposure to information. The platform does this through keyword filtering where the algorithm detects and limits the reach of videos containing specific keywords, hashtags, or phrases deemed "sensitive" such as political movements, protests or critiques of governments.

In early 2025, TikTok was banned in America for 14 hours by the united states government. This action was implemented citing concerns about "user data being collected by the Chinese Government", how ever this ban was later delayed by the United States president. After the Ban the platform started pushing certain content to some of the United States residents which was seen by the users that the platform had now tried shifting in their algorithm pushing certain types of content to the American users and redirect them to a different type of algorithm from the one they had previously been exposed to. TikTok has a method of using algorithmic bias where the system prioritises content that aligns with certain narratives, often favouring entertaining content, apolitical topics or less controversial material, This method create a space in the platform where people do not get informed on topics that relate to that certain material and restricting controversial content, the algorithm restricts users that post this type of

content and doesn't allow their accounts to reach the wider audience and this tactic they use is known as "stealth banning".

The question of who defines misinformation and with what biases remains fiercely contested. In the United States, the government, tech platforms, and third-party fact-checkers often collaborate (for example, through initiatives like the Election Integrity Partnership) to flag and remove "harmful" content. However, these decisions can be politically subjective, disproportionately silencing certain viewpoints while permitting others. An example of this bias is, During the Israel-Hamas war, TikTok faced accusations of suppressing pro-Palestinian voices under the guise of combating "hate speech," while pro-Israeli narratives faced fewer restrictions. Critics argue this reflects inherent bias in moderation systems, where power not truth determines what counts as "misinformation."

Greenstein et al. (2018) highlight how the Internet's promise to democratize access is undermined by "local complements" like infrastructure and regulatory environments, which disproportionately empower already dominant regions. For instance, during the Israel-Hamas war, TikTok faced accusations of suppressing pro-Palestinian voices under the guise of combating "hate speech," while pro-Israeli narratives flourished. This mirrors the authors' findings that digital platforms replicate offline power imbalances, where "agglomeration benefits" (economic advantages of dense urban centres) persist despite the Internet's potential to decentralize influence.

TikTok's geopolitical influence stems from its ownership by ByteDance, a Chinese company, and its role as a global platform for information dissemination. Because China enforces strict internet censorship domestically, TikTok's international operations are often scrutinized for potential biases or foreign influence. The U.S. and other Western governments have raised concerns that the Chinese government could pressure TikTok to suppress or promote certain content, shaping narratives in ways that align with Beijing's interests. For example, critics allege that TikTok may downplay topics sensitive to China, such as protests in Hong Kong or human rights issues in Xinjiang, while amplifying pro-China messaging. Conversely, in markets where TikTok faces political pressure like the United States the platform may adjust its algorithm to avoid controversy, such as limiting political content or steering users toward less divisive topics. These dynamics make TikTok a battleground in the broader tech war between China and the West, where control over data and narratives is seen as a strategic asset. As a result, TikTok's content moderation and algorithmic recommendations are not just business decisions but also subject to geopolitical tensions, raising questions about free speech, propaganda, and digital sovereignty.

The uneven geographies of online content production and moderation as highlighted in Graham's *Internet Geographies* mirror the power dynamics seen in platforms like TikTok. Just as historical maps like the *Carta Pisana* erased entire regions, modern digital platforms reproduce inequalities through "data shadows" (Graham 2014), where certain voices and places are systematically underrepresented or silenced. TikTok's algorithmic filtering, which suppresses political dissent or critiques of governments (e.g., pro-Palestinian content or discussions of Xinjiang), echoes the "digital divisions of labour" Graham describes: content moderation policies often reflect the geopolitical interests of powerful actors, not neutral standards.

Conclusion

TikTok's role in shaping what users see and engage with online reveals the complex and often opaque intersections between technology, geopolitics, and digital coloniality. While the platform outwardly promotes freedom of expression and creative individuality, its algorithmic design and content moderation practices consistently privilege certain narratives while silencing others. Whether through stealth bans, keyword suppression, or algorithmic redirection, TikTok reinforces global power imbalances by marginalizing voices that challenge dominant political or ideological positions. These actions not only distort public discourse but also replicate colonial hierarchies in digital form, where platforms governed by powerful states or corporations dictate which realities are visible and which are erased. In an era where digital platforms serve as primary sites of information, entertainment, and political engagement, it is critical to question who controls these spaces and for whose benefit. If left unchecked, the selective filtering of global injustices risks normalizing misinformation and deepening the divide between spectacle and truth ultimately making the internet less democratic, less diverse, and less just.

References

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