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The globalization of TikTok: Strategies, governance and geopolitics

ABSTRACT

This article examines the rise of TikTok in three aspects: globalization strategies, data and content policies, and geopolitical implications. Instead of focusing on app features and uses within the platform proper, we situate and critically analyse TikTok as a platform business in a global media policy and governance context. We first unpack TikTok's platformization process, tracing how TikTok gradually diversifies its business models and platform affordances to serve multisided markets. To understand TikTok's platform governance, we systematically analyse and compare its data and content policies for different regions. Crucial to its global expansion, we then look at TikTok's lobbying efforts to maintain government relations and corporate responses after facing multiple regulatory probing by various national governments. TikTok's case epitomizes problems and challenges faced by a slew of globalizing Chinese digital platforms in increasingly contested geopolitics that cut across the chasms and fault lines between the rise of China and India as emergent powers in the US-dominated global platform ecosystem.

Over the past decade, digital platforms have ushered in a new mode for information flows and user interactions. While much has been written about the US-based platforms like Facebook and Google, scholars have acknowledged the important roles that Chinese platforms play in the online environment (de Kloet et al. 2019). More recently, China-based digital platforms have turned their focus outward to foreign markets (Keane and Yu 2019). TikTok, a short-form video platform owned by ByteDance, became one of the world's most popular mobile applications in 2019 and 2020, attracting more than 100 million monthly active users across the world (Sherman 2020). The rapid growth of TikTok implicates China-based platforms as key actors counterbalancing the platform ecosystem dominated by the United States, and looming conflicts in digital sovereignty (Pohle and Thiel 2020).

This article examines the rise of TikTok in three aspects: globalization strategies, data and content policies, and geopolitical implications. Instead of focusing on mobile app features and creative uses within the platform proper, we situate and critically analyse TikTok as a platform business in a global media policy and governance context, unpacking its platform evolution and governance, as well as interactions with nation state governments. The significance of retelling TikTok's globalization process sheds important lights on its success as the *sui generis* China-based platform that has gained worldwide popularity. Although leading digital platforms in China, such as Alibaba, Tencent and JD, dominate the domestic markets, their overseas ventures thus far receive lukewarm results. TikTok as a case study therefore contributes to studies on the globalization of Chinese media – which focuses heavily on state-initiated efforts, campaigns and state-owned media (Hu and Ji 2018), while also complements the emerging line of research that looks at the cultures and platformization of TikTok (Chen et al. 2021; Kaye et al. 2020). Moreover, as a privately owned digital platform based in China, TikTok struggles with a split corporate identity: on the one hand, the company needs to carefully manage its Chinese root and identities, and on the other hand, to conform to different local standards of data protection and content policies. In other words, it needs to downplay its Chinese lineage to 'shake off authoritarian links' (Hern 2020b: n.pag.) yet a complete erasure of its Chinese origin is neither practical nor ideal when swamped in geopolitical conflicts, in which case the state could become a powerful ally and a guardian for corporate (as well as national) interests. Therefore, TikTok's case epitomizes problems and challenges faced by a slew of globalizing Chinese digital platforms in the increasingly contested geopolitics that cut across the fault lines between the rise of China and India as emergent powers in a US-dominated global platform ecosystem.

This article proceeds in the following order: firstly, we introduce a short history of TikTok and then discuss existing academic literature on Chinese platform studies. Secondly, we take stock of TikTok globalization strategies and trajectories, focusing on incentives for content creation, user retention, as well as partnerships with industry to fortify platform growth. Thirdly, this article analyses and cross-compares TikTok's data and content policies and lobbying efforts. Lastly, we conclude with TikTok's case against the contentious geopolitics among China, India and the United States and show how the wrestle for dominance in global platform ecosystem manifests in the interaction between nation state governments and platform companies.

TIKTOK: A BRIEF HISTORY

Founded in 2012, ByteDance owns and operates online content platforms and services ranging from online news, video and payment system. The initial line-up of the company's core products was Toutiao (translates to 'headline'), which started out as a news recommendation application and now-defunct Neihan Duanzi (translates to 'implied jokes'), an app for humorous content, jokes and memes with over 200 million users at its peak in 2017. The success with the company's short-video platform, Douyin, garnered 600 million daily active users by August 2020 (Toutiao Index 2020). The secret source for ByteDance's success is its algorithm-powered personalized recommendation system that predicts and pushes content to its users. ByteDance's mission statement is to 'combine the power of Artificial Intelligence with the growth of mobile internet to revolutionise the way people consume and receive information' (Byford 2018: n.pag.). With the financial backing of Kohlberg Kravis Roberts, SoftBank Group, Sequoia Capital, General Atlantic and Hillhouse Capital, ByteDance is one of the world's most valued start-ups, at an estimate of $180 billion in 2020 (Reuters 2020).

ByteDance started to expand into the global market in 2015. It has made various investments and strategic acquisitions in AI-powered content recommendation and video creation platforms, including the launch of global facing version of Toutiao – TopBuzz (shut down in 2020), investments in Indian and Indonesian news aggregator apps Dailyhunt and BABE in 2016, acquisition of video creation app Flipagram and mobile news aggregator News Republic. In November 2017, ByteDance acquired Muiscal.ly to establish 'a global platform for content creators and brands to engage with new markets' (BBC 2017: n.pag.).

Targeting the demographic of 13–18-year-olds, Musical.ly was founded in 2014 by a Shanghai-based company led by Alex Zhu and Luyu Yang. After the failed attempt at developing a short educational video app, Zhu and Yang turned to entertainment content. In its initial design, Musical.ly provided tools for video creation and hashtags for consumers and users to produce content. Musical.ly gained traction in the United States as lip syncing caught on as a popular cultural phenomenon and accumulated a 60-million user base in the United States (Saraceno 2019). The simplified user interface with auto-play function and hashtags such as #dontjudgechallenge help further diversify content creation beyond lip syncing and lyric videos. Meanwhile, the death of lip-syncing app Vine also contributed to Muscial.ly's success.

In 2017, ByteDance purchased Musical.ly. After rebranding in 2018, Musical.ly merged with TikTok and users migrated to TikTok. Much like its Chinese version Douyin, TikTok uses the recommendation system to curate a personalized 'For You' feed while learning user preferences through engagement with videos shown in the feed. The 'For You' feed is the platform's defining feature and the workings of several sets of data points, including user interactions, video information, device and account settings (TikTok 2020). One of the key principles engineered into the recommendation system is to minimize the limiting effects of filter bubble and to push a heterogeneous stream of content: 'our goal is to find balance between suggesting content that's relevant to you while also helping you find content and creators that encourage you to explore experiences you might not otherwise see' (2020: n.pag.). This core feature of the platform has spawned distinctive patterns of TikTok uses and content creations, which favour post-based virality over persona-based fame

and to be picked up and catalogued by the 'For You' feed is the key to becoming TikTok-famous (Abidin 2020).

TikTok has afforded cultural, social and political expressions and different formats of content creations. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok creators, including composers, fans, set designers and costumers, devised the 2007 Disney/Pixar film *Ratatouille* into a musical and sold more than $1 million in tickets (TikTok 2021). Media organizations, such as the *Washington Post*, *ESPN* and *E! News* joined the platforms to draw in new readers from the younger generation. US army also turned to TikTok to recruit in 2019. Retailers such as GameStop, Sephora and Walmart encourage employees to become TikTok influencers. In 2020, TikTok users organized a campaign to inflate attendance expectations for former President Donald Trump's campaign rally in Tulsa. TikTok also fostered a continuation and intensification of the construction of femininity and celebrity in contemporary girl culture (Kennedy 2020).

The app also brought sea change to music industries where artists turn to the platform as a launching pad to reach a global audience and to engage in co-creation through the app's duet function (Abidin 2020; Yao 2020). Users can save and appropriate the music as the audio for their TikTok posts. TikTok has thrived off with the music root of the former lip-syncing app Musical.ly. Termed as 'legacy practice' (Abidin 2020), the outflow of digital media content both from TikTok to mainstream media and vice versa demonstrates TikTok's role in facilitating and enabling platformized cultural creation (Nieborg and Poell 2018).

Amassing more than 200 million users (Singh 2020), India presents the largest market for TikTok as the young, mobile-savvy population soared in the country. In the United States, TikTok became the most downloaded app in 2019. There are roughly 1,000 engineers working for TikTok, half of whom are based in Mountain View, CA. The company is set to hire 3,000 more engineers for its Southeast Asia headquarter Singapore, Canada and Europe (Wang 2020). Financially speaking, TikTok started to explore monetization schemes in certain regions: the in-app purchase revenue tripled in the fourth quarter of 2019 to an estimate of $87 million (Wilhelm 2020). By 2020, TikTok has 100 million monthly active users in United States and nearly 700 million globally. It is in fact, an undebatable success story of a globalizing China-based platform.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rise of Chinese platforms

Digital platforms are conceptualized as techno-cultural constructs that facilitate economic activities and user interactions (Gillespie 2010; van Dijck et al. 2018). While the US-based platforms largely dominate the global platform ecosystem, China has successfully developed its own fleet of commercial platforms. Like their US counterparts, Chinese platforms promote social interactions and connect multisided markets, thereby platformizing the Chinese society (de Kloet et al. 2019; Plantin and de Seta 2019). Recent research shows that Chinese video platforms have the potential to improve the circulation of cultural products (Lin and de Kloet 2019; Wang and Lobato 2019), while others also reinforce existing inequalities in the country's gig economy (Chen 2018).

The development of Chinese platforms is fostered by government policies and aligns with the political agenda in China. The Internet Plus and Mass

Entrepreneurship are key policies facilitating the emergence of Chinese plat-forms since 2015 (Hong 2017b; Lin and de Kloet 2019). According to the thir-teenth Five-Year Plan, digital economy and creative industries are considered 'pillar industry' in China. The Chinese government frames digital platforms as important participants in the digital economy and innovations. Moreover, platform companies also partake in the promotion of official initiatives and policies. Recent studies have found that Chinese platforms provide technolo-gies and spread specific content for political purposes (Plantin and de Seta 2019; Chen et al. 2021).

Short-video platforms in China

With 897 million mobile internet users, China has a booming short-video industry. Ranging from 15–60 seconds, short videos are created for various purposes: entertainment, information, satire, education and commercial. In September 2013, Tencent launched its short-video sharing platform Weishi and it quickly garnered a large group of users during the 2014 Spring Festival as entertainment celebrities sent New Year messages through the applica-tion. Weishi featured eight-second short video – a deliberate design decision considering the capacity of mobile phone storage, wireless data charges and traffic at the time (Xie 2018). As short video flourishes as a content format, various players entered the market, such as Miaopai, Sina's short-video plat-form and Kuaishou, the GIF-editing-spawned short-video platform.

Short-video industry in China also benefited from and facilitated by the wanghong (translates to 'internet celebrities') cultural phenomenon. Through sharing and producing short videos, wanghong convert their followers into consumers after being streamlined and professionalized by wanghong incu-bators and agencies such as Ruhn and e-commerce platforms like Alibaba (Han 2020). As big capital and big platforms (including short-video platforms) assemble the discovery, professionalization, production and monetization of wanghong into a lucrative industry, short-video industry further fortifies the platformization of the 'unlikely creative class' in China (Lin and de Kloet 2019). With the convenience of mobile phones and brevity of less than one minute, users from lower sociocultural strata in the Chinese society can now accrue online fame and afford a degree of economic stability (Cunningham et al. 2019).

By 2019, the short-video industry in China is estimated at RMB 130 billion and with more than 800 million users – a staggering penetration rate of 95 per cent of all Chinese web population (CNSA 2020). The commer-cial prosperity of the industry also brings along greater precarity: as short videos are consumed, shared and liked by millions, the cultural politics of content creation is up for closer scrutiny not only by the state but also by platform owners (Cunningham et al. 2019; Zhang et al. 2020). For exam-ple, ByteDance's Douyin features the #PositiveEnergy on its main page. This hashtag prompts the type of content that promotes attitudes or emotions that are aligned with the ideological or value system of the Chinese Communist Party and constitutes a form of playful patriotism facilitated by the platform (Chen et al. 2021). Various levels of governments in China have also harnessed short videos to conduct online publicity and government affairs.

In 2011, China Netcasting Services Association (CNSA), an industry asso-ciation under the supervision of National Radio and Television Administration,

was established. CNSA issued a 100-article standard for content review and moderation practices for platform companies in China. The content regulation standard, drafted in consultation with mainstream media organizations such as China Central Television and short-video platforms Miaopai and Kuaishou, stipulates that platform should assign at least one reviewer for every 1000 videos uploaded every day (Zhang 2019). Research has reported that as many as 60–70 per cent employees in short-video companies were hired to censor and moderate user input (Zhang et al. 2020).

Meanwhile, as short-video industry getting more competitive, creators are facing heightened economic precarity, uncertainties and exploitation by platform owners (Tan et al. 2020). Short-video platforms wield significant power leveraging algorithms and diverting traffic to encourage or discourage certain types of content. Traffic may be diverted to video creators who have a large group of followers to attract eyeballs and fulfil monetization targets. In other cases, traffic could also be taken away from those who violated the community rules as a form of 'punishment' (Zhang et al. 2020). Algorithm is imagined by individual content creators as classifying and disciplining mechanism (Zhang et al. 2020). By controlling and concealing the operating algorithms, logics of control and profit maximization are engineered into the workings of platform to compete for the utmost scarce resources: user attentions, retention and in-app spending.

Despite fierce market competition and clampdown of state and industry regulation, ByteDance thrives as one of the leading short-video platform owners in the Chinese market. Zhang (2020) argues that Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, successfully deployed platformization strategies in transforming the mobile app from an entertainment online community to a self-fashioned video infrastructure of the country. Douyin not only features a wide range of video content, from propaganda, tourism, city branding, to online education and e-commerce, it also strives to establish itself as the video encyclopaedia with the ability to record, store, recycle and commercialize user data (Zhang 2020). For overseas market, ByteDance mobilizes the 'parallel platformization' strategy: Operated as separate apps, TikTok and Douyin feature similar core functions; however, the global-facing TikTok differs in its content policies and monetization models (Kaye et al. 2020).

Geopolitics in global communication

While Chinese platforms focus mainly on domestic markets, some, such as TikTok, are aggressively expanding across the globe (Keane and Yu 2019). China has always considered communication technologies as powerful instrument for economic growth, innovation and export upgrades. The main goal of developing information and communication technology (ICT) and digital economy, according to the Chinese government, is to end China's technological dependence upon foreign companies (Hong 2017a). More recently, Alibaba has globalized its e-commerce platform (Vila Seoane 2020) and payment tool Alipay in the Asia-Pacific region. Around one-third of Alipay's users are from overseas markets. Similarly, Tencent also actively invests in global game industries in recent years (The Economist 2017) and has quickly jumped from fourth to second place in the global gaming sector in a short span of three years (Nieborg et al. 2020). Undergirded by global financial capital (Jia and Winseck 2018) and chaperoned by state policies, Chinese platforms have become formidable players in the global platform ecosystem.

Communication technologies have been the strategic resources for geopolitical competition and international politics (Headrick and Griset 2001). The development of telegraph and submarine cables in the mid-nineteenth century, for instance, played significant roles in fostering the circulation of economic and informational commodities, and fundamentally improved the spread of British empire around the world (Hills 2002). China has recognized the importance of ICTs in the mid-1980s, but it had to rely on foreign loans and providers to build domestic telecom networks (Harwit 2007). Since 2003, China began to promote 'going-out' strategies, encouraging its tech companies like Huawei and ZTE and media agencies like Xinhua to promote their products and content in overseas markets (Keane 2016; Hong 2017a). In the field of communication infrastructures, Huawei, banned by the Trump administration, serves a case in point as the geopolitics surround exterritorial internet infrastructure intensify (Tang 2020). Similarly, TikTok is also caught in the geopolitical crosshair among China, United States and India, as such tension reaches the realm of digital platforms.

METHODS

To systematically examine platform strategies, business operations and globalization trajectories of TikTok, we collected and analysed both first-hand and secondary documents, such as news reports and clips from the *New York Times*, *Reuters*, *TechCrunch, Global Times* and *Politico,* complemented by a close examination to study the app's key features and user interfaces. We canvassed TikTok's privacy policy, terms of services, media releases, announcements and transparency reports – all available on its website. This research also takes stock of publicly available records to gauge the company's lobbying spending, such as the United States Senate Lobbying Disclosure, Lobbying Issue Codes and Canada Registry of Lobbyists.

TIKTOK'S PLATFORMIZATION STRATEGIES

Platform as a concept is understood simultaneously as an economic mechanism that serves multisided markets (both institutional actors and end users) in business studies and a computational infrastructure that allows and prompts end users to afford particular types of activities, connections and knowledge (Nieborg and Poell 2018). Since its launch, TikTok's platformization trajectory follows such dual logics by expanding platform affordances to serve a widening array of institutions and end users.

For software developers, TikTok enabled tools for developers to embed TikTok video on websites and mobile phones. It also introduced its TikTok for Developers Programme, which allows creators to edit videos in other applications and then post on TikTok using the 'share to TikTok' function. These two functions not only help TikTok to funnel its content outside the platform proper but also facilitate cross-platform content production. To accrue economy of scale, TikTok has released the Back to Business Programme, which subsidizes small- to medium-sized businesses for up to $2,000 advertising credit to launch ad campaigns on TikTok. To further explore e-commerce growth, TikTok launched the Marketing Application Programming Interface (API). This API enables advertisers to monitor key metrics and measure the success of their TikTok campaigns. The Creator Marketplace facilitates collaboration of brands and influencers through data generated on the platform.

To entice users, TikTok diversifies content creation through the use of hashtags and hashtag challenges. Few examples are #edutok, which aims to democratize learning for the Indian digital community, and #MatKarForward to tackle misinformation during COVID-19 epidemics. TikTok has hosted live concerts with the Weeknd, K-Pop artists and Indian artists for COVID-19 relief efforts, which also drew in millions of users (Spangler 2020). In July 2020, TikTok started to offer monetization opportunities to video creators. It launched the Creator Fund of US$200 million in the United States and US$70 million in United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, France and Spain to help creators who are seeking opportunities to foster a livelihood on the app. Qualifying creators must be 18 years or older and consistently posting original videos and creating content that aligns with TikTok's community guidelines. Part of this fund is designated as Creative Learning Fund for the production of 'informative, instructional, and motivational videos' (Thoensen 2020: n.pag.). Through paying video creators, TikTok also shapes the content ecosystem and actively projects the platform's preferred uses and appropriations, which led to several issues in the roll out of the Fund, such as the opaqueness of the pay-out schemes (Matsakis 2020).

TikTok experiments with different monetization models by exploring industry partnerships: it integrated with Teespring to sell merchandize directly through the app; it also explored social e-commerce in a partnership with Walmart for livestream shopping; in collaboration with Shopify, it allows merchants to manage ad campaign through the TikTok channel app installed on Shopify dashboard (Perez 2020). TikTok also teamed up with multiplatform media company MACRO to launch TikTok for Black Creatives to boost Black creators, and distributing music through working with music distribution start-up UnitedMasters.

By instituting changes in the platform infrastructure such as API, Software Developer Kit, portals and functions like Creator Marketplace, TikTok's plat-formization process serves a wide range of users. Through an expanding array of business partnerships, TikTok is broadening the boundaries of the platform by acting as a key nodal point in several industries, such as talents discovery, music production and e-commerce.

GLOBALIZATION CHALLENGES

As TikTok rises in popularity, it has been closely imbricated in policy conversations and regulatory actions by various governments. The company mainly faced two sets of regulatory challenges: data policy and security, and content regulation. With its main user base of teens and youth, TikTok has been probed in its data and privacy protection. In the United States, the app was fined by the Federal Trade Committee (FTC) for US$5.7 million for illegally collecting names, e-mail addresses, pictures and locations of children under 13 in 2019. TikTok later deleted data collected on children and settled the fine with a revamped app feature of 'TikTok for Younger Users'. In Europe, TikTok is reportedly scrutinized by privacy regulators since June 2020 (Bodoni 2020).

In terms of content regulation, TikTok has been criticized in its moderation policy, which pressures content moderators to remove users with an 'abnormal body shape, chubby, obsess or too thin' from the For You feed (Hern 2020a). To ameliorate speculation of Chinese intervention, TikTok has instituted a localized moderation procedure to hire US employees to moderate content generated in the country (*Wall Street Journal* 2020). In the Asia-Pacific, TikTok

has been slapped with regulatory bans and blocks for content hosted on the platform. In 2018, the Indonesian Communications and Informatics Ministry blocked TikTok for negative content and the decision was overturned after TikTok agreed to hire a team of twenty censors in the country to monitor and moderate content (*The Star* 2018). In 2019, in a wide sweep of anti-pornography campaign, Bangladesh's High Court ordered pornographic websites to be blocked for six months: TikTok, among other websites such as the Bengali version of the Google Books, was blocked (Aljazeera 2019). In 2020, with 20 million users, Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) issued a final warning to TikTok over 'immoral, obscene and vulgar content', referencing the *Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act*, even though activists contested the warning as efforts to censor heightened criticism levelled at the government (Gannon 2020). On 9 October, the PTA banned TikTok for 'immoral/indecent content' (2020: n.pag.). However, the ban was lifted ten days later after PTA obtained TikTok's assurance on moderating said content. To cajole public inquires and scrutiny, TikTok announced the opening of Transparency Center in Los Angeles to invite experts to view its content moderation practices (Pappas 2020).

To better understand the regulation of TikTok, in what follows, we present an analysis comparing its platform governance of data and content polices across different jurisdictions.

DATA POLICY: DATA COLLECTION, USAGE AND SHARING

According to TikTok's data policies, user data are categorized into three groups: personal information, user-generated content (UGC) and user interactions. More specifically, personal information is provided by users when they register new accounts, including basic data like gender, location and e-mail addresses. UGC indicates video content produced by users, whereas interaction information contain data about how users engage with social interaction on TikTok (e.g., friends, likes and sharing). It has been found that TikTok takes a geographical-based approach (Jia and Ruan 2020; Stockmann et al. 2020) in dealing with user data. With the existing arrangement, all user data are stored in the United States. TikTok's operating entities in the European Union are building a data centre in Ireland and this will effectively end the current data storage arrangement (stored in the United States with backup in Singapore).

Currently, TikTok provides three versions of privacy policy: the United States, European Economic Area (EEA) and Switzerland, and other countries. A careful exploration of these policies reveals differences and similarities of TikTok's data collection and protection. First, we find that TikTok collects the same data and information from these three regions (see Table 1). The platform gathers users' profile information like age, name, e-mail or phone number, and social media account. UGC and messages sent by users are also collected by TikTok across these three regions. Moreover, other behavioural data such as payment information, third party services and location data are also collected during the use of TikTok. This suggests that TikTok conducts standardized data collection for its global users.

Furthermore, the main purpose of user data is consistent but with local differences. Overall, our analysis shows that TikTok adopts user data for four purposes: improving products and services, offering personalization, providing promotion and marketing, and conducting platform governance. We also find that the most important purposes mentioned in these three Privacy Policies are the use of data for user personalization and platform governance,

	United States	EEA and Switzerland	Other countries
What data are collected?	Profile information	Profile information	Profile information
	UGC and messages, payment	UGC and messages, payment	UGC and messages, payment
	Phone contacts	Phone contacts	Phone contacts
	Third parties	Third parties	Third parties
	Location	Location	Location
	Others	Others	Others
How are data used?	Nineteen items	23 items	Nineteen items
	Improve products and services (4)	Improve products and services (5)	Improve products and services (3)
	Personalization (7)	Personalization (8)	Personalization (7)
	Promotion and marketing (2)	Promotion and marketing (3)	Promotion and marketing (1)
	Governance (6)	Governance (7)	Governance (8)
Who has access to user data?	Third party providers and business partners	Third party providers and business partners	Cloud storage providers
	TikTok's corporate group	Content moderation services, measurement providers	Business partners
	Advertisers	Advertisers	Content moderation services, measurement providers
			Advertisers
	Law enforcement agencies, public authorities	Law enforcement agencies, public authorities	Law enforcement agencies, public authorities

Source: TikTok.

Table 1: TikTok's data policies.

which constitutes TikTok's most prominent feature of the AI-powered 'For You' feed. First, TikTok highlights that the platform aims to analyse user data in order to provide personalized content and services. For example, its US policy indicates that the platforms will use user data 'to customize the content you see when you use the platform'. The policy for EEA and Switzerland also mentions the use of data to 'personalise the content you receive and provide you with tailored content that will be of interest to you'. This suggests that TikTok considers personalization and customization as the main purposes of user data.

Second, the use of data for platform governance and content moderation is also important across these three regions. Two main functions emerge from our analysis. TikTok explains that it will use data collected from users

to: (1) detect abuse, fraud and harmful content; and (2) enforce platform terms and conditions. This suggests that the platform attempts to leverage user data for moderating false and harmful information and in the meantime, assess user activity. Interestingly, while promotion and marketing are not the most important item when TikTok explains how it analyses user data, the platform does imply the use of data for advertising and promotional materials. Privacy policy for other countries further indicates that the platform will explore user data and then offer personalized advertising.

In addition, TikTok shares user data with other actors. For example, the platform shares profile information with third party providers and business partners. It also shares UGC and network data with some business partners. Notably, TikTok mentions that it will share data with content moderation services and measurement providers. This further suggests the use of user data for platform governance. Across these three regions, we find that TikTok clearly indicates that it may share user data with law enforcement agencies and public authorities if it is legally required or if such use is reasonable. Finally, TikTok discusses that user data collected from other countries will be shared with cloud storage providers, but it does not indicate the use of cloud services for the United States, EEA and Switzerland.

Overall, our findings suggest that while TikTok conducts three versions of data policy, they have standardized procedures and usages. The platform collects three types of data and information across the globe and mainly adopts user data for the purposes of personalization, marketing and platform governance. This indicates that TikTok follows consistent data collection protocols. However, regional differences indicate the importance of obtaining user permission for the United States, EEA and Switzerland. Furthermore, TikTok's data sharing policies are similar across these three regions, but the use of cloud service is only highlighted in privacy policy for other countries. In sum, TikTok localizes its data practices and uses according to different frameworks of data protection.

CONTENT MODERATION

The rise of misinformation and disinformation has generated growing concerns about how to regulate and control harmful content on digital platforms (Crawford and Gillespie 2016). Technology companies like Facebook and Twitter have conducted multiple measures, such as automated content moderation, fact-checking and flagging, to combat the spread of falsehoods. As a video-sharing platform, TikTok also adopts several tools to detect and moderate misleading and offensive content. For example, it has been found that TikTok moderated videos relating to Hong Kong protests and Tiananmen (Hern 2019), and had employed content moderators in mainland China (Mathur 2020). This raises questions regarding whether TikTok might adopt content moderation to advance China's political agendas and policies in the global platform ecosystem.

TikTok also conduct three versions of content moderation policies around the world: the United States, EEA and Switzerland, and other countries (Table 2). Notably, while TikTok also sets new terms of services, we found that the content moderation policy in this version is similar to other countries. To be specific, our analysis suggests that TikTok's moderation policy focuses on five types of content and user behaviour. First, TikTok forbids the spread of any computer viruses and junk e-mail through its services. Second, the

	United States	EEA and Switzerland	Other countries
Spams and viruses	2	2	2
Privacy, copyright and IP	2	3	2
Harmful content	5	5	5
User behaviour	1	2	0
Sole judgement of TikTok	1	1	0
Total	11	13	9

Source: TikTok.

Table 2: The number of policies in TikTok's content moderation.

moderation policies also indicate that TikTok will remove content that violate privacy rights, copyright and intellectual property. In addition, we find that the most important category in content moderation is harmful information, including offensive, hateful, pornographic content, as well as trolling, bullying, threats and discriminatory messages. This strategy resembles other large platforms, which aim to deter users from sharing harmful content online.

Interestingly, while content moderation policy for other countries involves nine categories, the policies for the United States and EEA/Switzerland have 11 and 13, respectively. Moderation policy for the United States includes two new items: user behaviour and TikTok's judgement. First, TikTok will also moderate users' comments and recommendations if they violate certain regulations or laws. Second, TikTok mentions that it might remove certain content based on 'the sole judgment of TikTok'. It is not clear how TikTok makes the judgement, but this suggests that TikTok conducts more restricted moderation measure in the United States. Similarly, content moderation policy for EEA and Switzerland also contains user behaviour and TikTok's own judgement. Further, it also includes one more item related to privacy and user behaviour.

Overall, TikTok's content moderation focuses on harmful content and privacy rights, and it is consistent across these three regions. Like its data policy, content moderation also reflects regional differences. We find that TikTok might conduct more restrictive moderation in the United States, EEA and Switzerland. Importantly, the use of 'TikTok's own judgment' in these regions might bring concerns about moderating certain content without explanations and clearly stated rationales.

GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

TikTok proactively partakes in industry association and policymaking process. In 2020, it collaborated with eleven European Union health ministries on COVID-19 online information campaigns and formed partnership with French trade association Syntec Numérique and UK's Internet Watch Foundation on combating child exploitation materials. The company also pulled together and hired a group of tech policy veterans who previously worked for US-based media and tech companies Yahoo!, Snapchat, Microsoft, Facebook and Disney. These individuals provide insights and experience in helping TikTok navigate its policy issues as the platform expands into foreign markets.

Lobbying is the proxy for media power and reveals the depth and pervasiveness of their political influence (Popiel 2018). Unlike other Chinese tech companies that are largely absent in lobbying efforts (Tencent, for example,

hired its first lobbyist in lieu of its US ban in 2020) (Kayali and Gonzalez 2019), TikTok has devised concerted lobbying efforts since 2019. It hired Brussel-based tech lobby in Europe's copyright reform. In the United States, TikTok's lobbying spending jumped from $300,000 in Q1 to $500,000 in Q2 2019 and the number increased nearly fivefold in 2020 (Table 3). The company hired former congressman and lobbyists from General Atlantic, William Ford, SoftBank, Sequoia. In Canada, TikTok hired Michael von Herff from Public Affairs to lobby for supports to Canadian creators, especially indigenous and French-language creators. As shown in Table 3, TikTok's lobbying efforts focus on several topical areas: firstly, as reactions to government-imposed network restrictions, such as the ban of TikTok in government-issued devices in the United States; secondly, to support policy initiatives that are conducive to TikTok's business development, such as copyright reform and e-commerce initiatives; thirdly, to support cultural policies and content policy, such as Section 230 of the *Communications Decency Act*. Even though TikTok's lobbying efforts lag far behind those of Facebook, Google and Amazon, it helps the company to cement and safeguard its global presence and growth.

TIKTOK AND GEOPOLITICS

The rapid growth of TikTok, together with China's booming digital platforms, reify the much-touted 'China threat' by both market players and politicians in the US-dominated global platform ecosystem. Since 2018, TikTok has been embroiled in geopolitical contestations and rivalries between United States and China. The owner of TikTok, ByteDance, has been put under investigation by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CIFUS) in a review of the company's $1 billion purchase of Muscial.ly. Later, the chair of CIFUS Secretary Steven Mnuchin issued the statement that CIFUS unanimously recommended the divestitures of TikTok's operation in the United States. On 14 August 2020, then-US president Donald Trump ordered the divestment of TikTok's US operation (Office of the Press Secretary 2020). It further ordered TikTok to destroy all data collected on its users in the United States and proposed TikTok to sell 20 per cent stake to US businesses. In August 2020, the Chinese minister of commerce and science and technology unveiled new regulations, restricting exports of technology that includes artificial intelligence, computing and data-processing technologies. This new export restriction

Year	Lobby spending	Lobbying areas	Specific issues
2019	US$550,000	Communication (4); copyright (1); computer industry (1)	Technology policy Internet company and privacy
2020	US$2,540,000	Communication (4); copyright (7); computer industry (1)	Content regulation; cyber security; privacy; protecting children; Section 230 *Rights for Transportation Security Officers Act 2020*; *National Defence Authorization Act* for Fiscal Year 2021

Source: United States Senate Lobbying Disclosure.

Table 3: TikTok's lobbying in the United States.

instantly complicates TikTok's sale because ByteDance must obtain a license from Chinese authorities to export such technology. In November 2020, federal judge Wendy Beetlestone blocked the removal of TikTok from app stores after three TikTok users filed a lawsuit in Pennsylvania. Again, in December 2020, federal judge Carl Nichols blocked the TikTok injunction.

Meanwhile, the rise of China-based platform TikTok and its global growth has triggered the expansion of the US State Department's 'Clean Network Initiative', which forbids the use of Chinese tech in US telecommunication systems and prevents app stores such as Google Play and Apple App Store to distribute Chinese apps, despite various reports, including one conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency, which stated that there is no evidence that TikTok posed threats (Sanger and Barnes 2020). US government agencies, such as the Transportation Security Administration, Commerce Department and US military issued ban on employees' use of TikTok app. US Senates and House of Representative voted to prohibit the use of TikTok on all government-issued phones. To wrest back the much-touted 'China threat' narrative in data security, in September 2020, China launched the Global Data Security Initiative to stop the use of foreign technology which could impair the nation's critical infrastructure and data securities.

The twists and turns of TikTok's saga in the United States demonstrate digital platforms and the power they hold in gatekeeping infrastructural services, online expressions and data provision, making them the new frontier for tech rivalries. Nation states mobilize and politicize their legislative authorities and sovereignty to advance the political and economic interests in the global platform ecosystem. Instagram capitalizes on TikTok's crisis and launched its own short-video app, Reels. The stand-off between United States and China in the case of TikTok only brings back the memory of Google Search's withdrawal from mainland China in 2010, citing concerns with censorship – only a decade later, Google was found working on a new version of censored search product, Dragonfly, for the Chinese market. If anything is to be learnt from Google's case, it is that pinpointing a clear association between national origins and corporate behaviours crudely ignores the commonalities of the capitalist drive and data ambitions of these digital platforms (cf. Winseck 2017; Yeo 2016). In an increasingly connected and global platform ecosystem, to essentialize the Chinese identity onto TikTok is everything but drawing a line in the sand, as the platform is financed with transnational venture capital and localizes its content moderation and data practices in different jurisdictions. Indeed, as many have pointed out, the problem with TikTok is not that it is Chinese, but the pervasiveness of platforms in every domain of our digital lives and how governments should deploy a set of standardized practices and policies to properly govern them (Savic and Abidin 2020; Sacks 2020).

India, too, is an actor too important to ignore in TikTok's commercial landscape, especially as China–India geopolitics intensify. Falling victim to recent China–India border conflicts, India banned TikTok together with 58 Chinese mobile apps in June. Oddly, one of ByteDance's music streaming services, Resso (ranked eighth on Indian Apple App store and Google Play Store), remains operational. TikTok's ban abruptly halted the source of income and entertainment and blocked an alternative media outlet for many TikTok users and creators in the country, especially those who are marginalized by Bollywood's stranglehold in Indian's cultural industries (Pahwa 2020). The Indian government is reportedly in talks with ByteDance for a sale to the country's largest telecommunication company Reliance Jio, as it fiercely

expands in the Indian market through vertically and horizontally integrated infrastructure and platform ambitions (Mukherjee 2019). After TikTok's ban in India, a slew of home-grown clones mushroomed, such as Chingari, Roposo, Moj, Mitron and Josh, a home-grown short-video platform with funding from Google and Microsoft (Reuters 2020).

CONCLUSION

In this article, we systematically examined the globalization strategies, platform governance and geopolitical implications of TikTok's rise. TikTok as a case study shows the rocky path of development of a globalizing China-based platform. The commercial success brings with it closer scrutiny and hostility both in public perceptions and as nations compete to decide the future of internet and mobile communication. The platform evolution, business strategies as well as active lobbying efforts make TikTok excel as a market leader. In the meantime, whether TikTok is able to sustain such growth hinges on, among other things, how it will continually draw on local, regional and global human capital to navigate distinctive regulatory environments and sociocultural values harboured by respective markets.

TikTok's global development should serve as a cautionary tale in using national origins as a proxy to predict and pre-empt platform behaviours. TikTok as a platform does manifest similar concerns with Facebook and YouTube, for example, especially in monetizing creators and in content moderation. At the same time, the analysis of TikTok's data policies shows the platform does follow standardized procedure and usage of data within local and regional legal framework. TikTok's case study offers important insights to the globalization strategies of other Chinese platform companies in particular, and the role of nation states in keeping the power of digital platform in check in general.

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