

TikTok's data collection being scrutinised by Australia's privacy watchdog

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Australia's privacy watchdog has launched an inquiry into how TikTok harvests personal data and whether it is being done with consent. The Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC) will examine whether the social media platform has breached the online privacy of Australians through the use of marketing pixels, which track people's online habits. This can include where they shop, how long they stay on websites and personal information, such as email addresses and mobile phone numbers. Liberal senator James Paterson, who has been campaigning against TikTok and its parent company, ByteDance, has alleged the social media platform is using pixels to collect information of non-TikTok users. Sign up for a weekly email featuring our best reads "This conduct would be unacceptable from any company but is particularly alarming given TikTok is beholden to the Chinese Communist party and is required under China's intelligence laws to share information with Chinese government intelligence agencies," Paterson said. A TikTok spokesperson said its use of marketing pixels "is compliant with all current Australian privacy laws and regulations and we dismiss any suggestion otherwise". "Pixel usage, which is voluntary for our advertising clients to adopt, is an industry-wide tool used to improve the effectiveness of advertising services," the spokesperson said. The OAIC conducts an inquiry before deciding whether there is enough evidence to warrant a formal investigation into claims. Attorney general, Mark Dreyfus, said the privacy commissioner had been given additional legislative information-gathering powers to carry out inquiries like this and said he expected TikTok to be transparent with any requests. "When serious allegations of this matter are raised, we expect that they will be cooperating fully with the privacy commissioner," he said. New privacy legislation in response to a review of the privacy act is expected to land in parliament in the new year. Paterson has led a crusade against TikTok since assuming the shadow home affairs portfolio and wants the app and its Chinese-owned parent company treated as a "serious national security threat". "These latest revelations add to a litany of misconduct by TikTok and its parent company, ByteDance, including using the TikTok app to spy on journalists, suppressing content critical of the Chinese Communist party and seeking to mislead the public about ByteDance's extensive links to the Chinese government," he said. "TikTok must finally come clean and demonstrate full cooperation and compliance with Australia's regulatory authorities and not repeat the obfuscation we have seen previously from this company when facing scrutiny." TikTok was recently fined €345m (\$560m) for breaking EU data laws about children's accounts after a £12.7m (\$24m) fine by the UK data watchdog for illegally processing the data of 1.4 million children under the age of 13 who were using its platform. The platform was banned on Australian government devices earlier this year after similar bans in other western countries, with the Albanese government stating the app "poses significant

security and privacy risks to non-corporate commonwealth entities arising from extensive collection of user data and exposure to extrajudicial directions from a foreign government that conflict with Australian law". TikTok reported 8.5 million Australian users in June and has emerged as the social media app of choice for gen Z.