

Montana TikTok users denounce ban: 'We have terrible roads but they're banning an app'

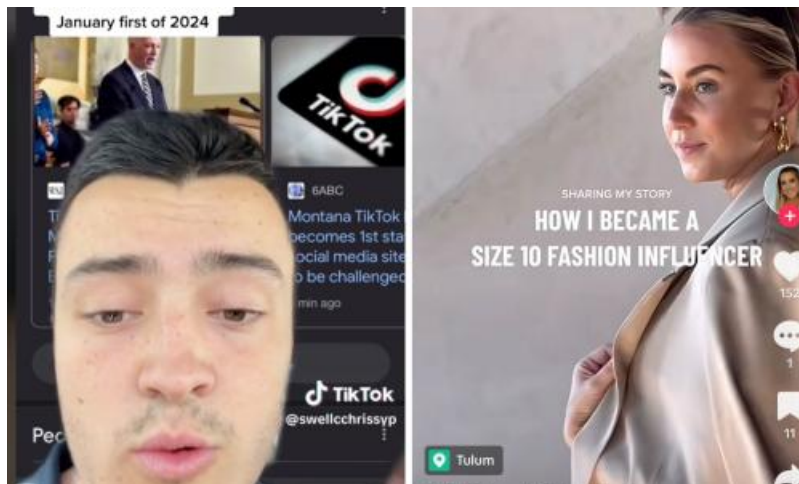
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Author: Alaina Demopoulos

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On Wednesday, a 30-year-old influencer named Kylie Nelson signed a deal with TikTok to promote the app on her page. A few hours later, she learned that the state of Montana had passed a law banning TikTok. "Now I'm wondering: what do we do here?" said Nelson, who lives in Billings and is a full-time content creator. "About 60% to 70% of my brand collaborations are with TikTok. So, yeah, I'm pretty bummed out by the news." Nelson has over 206,000 TikTok followers and estimates that she will make about \$60,000 through her influencing this year. Since she quit her job to become a content creator, most of her income relies on the app's existence. Lawmakers across the country have threatened to ban TikTok, but Montana became the first state to go through with the idea this week. Under the new rule, signed into law by the Republican governor, Greg Gianforte, mobile app stores are banned from offering the app to users starting next year. Nelson is skeptical that the law will go into effect. "I'm going to believe it's banned when it's actually banned next January," she said. "Until then, I'm going to talk with my talent agency and TikTok to come up with a full game plan." It is not just income Nelson stands to lose. Most of her posts give inspiration for mid-size fashion lovers, or people who fit into clothing larger than sizes 0-8 but smaller than a size 12. It's one of the many niche groups that has found a platform on the app. "The very first thing I thought about when I heard of the ban was the community of women that I've built," Nelson said. "We're supporting each other to feel confident in our clothes." TikTok is owned by ByteDance, a Chinese company, and has come under scrutiny for its ties to the country. Politicians on both sides of the aisle, from the Biden administration to Donald Trump, have expressed concerns over national security and the potential of TikTok sharing user data with China. Christian W Poole, a 20-year-old from Bozeman, got his first 100,000 followers in high school by rating Montana towns on a scale from 1 to 10. (Lincoln and Virginia City were his top picks.) He now has 418,500 followers on the app, where he dubs himself "the unofficial ambassador for the state of Montana". Poole said that his state's government had larger issues to tackle than TikTok. "It's so goofy to target them," he said. "We have terrible infrastructure; last year we had massive flooding that took out bridges and roads. There are so many other issues that nobody's talking about, but they're focusing on banning an entertainment app because they're afraid of China mining data that the US already mines itself." TikTok remains extraordinarily popular among young Americans; it has over 100 million users in the US. Representatives for TikTok told the AP that more than 200,000 people in Montana alone use the app. One day after the bill was signed, content creators from the state began posting under the hashtag #montanalovestiktok, which has been viewed over 68,000 times. "It doesn't seem like this bill has any support among the public," Poole said. "Well, maybe older audiences, and Governor Gianforte is pandering to them. The average person in Montana doesn't really care." Poole will continue to use the app. "TikTok is my favorite hobby," he said. "It gets

me some money, but I don't monetize it too much. I want to make people laugh and relate to me. If I lost the avenue to do that in January, that would suck, but right now I'm focusing on what I have." Under the law, users will not face any punishment for accessing TikTok, but app stores like Apple and Android, plus TikTok itself, would face a fine of \$10,000 per day every time someone "is offered the ability" to access or download the app. TikTok planned to challenge the law, which a spokesperson said violated first amendment rights. "We want to reassure Montanans that they can continue using TikTok to express themselves, earn a living, and find community as we continue working to defend the rights of our users inside and outside of Montana," the spokesperson said in a statement. One survey conducted by the website Casino.org asked over 2,000 Montana-based content creators whether they would continue to use the platform post-ban; 35% said they intended to. The users will have to circumvent the law by using VPNs or proxies to use the app, which would leave them vulnerable to cyber-attacks. Nelson does not know what she will do if the law goes into effect. "The VPN thing is intriguing to me, but I'm also a rule-follower, so I'd have a hard time doing that," she said. As bans against TikTok ramp up, ByteDance has started to push Lemon8, its newer video and photo-sharing app. Nelson said she might move her content there. "There is always going to be a new app that comes out," she said. "It's kind of like how Instagram faded out and TikTok came in. Maybe next up is Lemon8."