

# **Banned in the West, Booming in the South: TikTok, Techno-Nationalism, and Digital Colonialism**

## Introduction

The 21st century has seen the internet transform from a means of global interconnectedness to a geopolitical war zone where virtual spaces determine national security, economic supremacy, and cultural power. ByteDance's TikTok, based in China, represents the pinnacle of this trajectory.

As Western countries prohibit and restrict it out of concern for data security, the app is booming in the Global South, where its skyrocketing popularity sheds light on a new type of digital dependence. This article contends that TikTok's global popularity mirrors two prevailing trends in digital geopolitics: techno-nationalism, in which Western attempts at stemming foreign invasion of the tech industry are involved, and digital colonialism, in which emerging economies become economically and culturally reliant on foreign-owned apps.

From the theoretical assumptions of the given sources, this analysis discusses how the asymmetrical effects of the internet, the Sino-American AI duopoly, and the techno-colonial forces meet in the phenomenon of TikTok. Using case study analysis—India's ban on TikTok, Africa's digital ecosystem, and U.S.-China tech rivalry—this essay demonstrates how digital inequalities exacerbate global power asymmetries.

## The Heterogeneous Effect of the Internet and the "Death of Distance" Illusion

**The Promise vs. Reality of Digital Globalization** The internet was once touted as a "great equalizer," minimizing economic frictions such as communication, transport, and search costs. Early enthusiasts, including Cairncross, foresaw a "death of distance," in which digital connectivity would flatten global hierarchies. Empirical observation, however, presents a more nuanced picture. The effect of the internet differs wildly depending on local infrastructure, human capital, and institutional support.

For instance, although digital technologies can reduce economic remoteness in rural regions, their gains are concentrated in urban areas with initial privileges. In the US, the adoption of the internet resulted in unequal wage increases for well-connected high-income counties, leaving rural areas behind. In Africa, the lack of broadband coverage limits internet use to urban elites, entrenching existing disparities.

This indicates that the digital revolution, far from being uniformly beneficial, has the potential to reinforce underlying structural divisions. TikTok and the Illusion of a Borderless Internet.

TikTok's ascendancy is a manifestation of this uneven virtual world. Its algorithmic sheen and ease of content creation have propelled it to global fame, but its uptake varies utterly across regions of the world. In the Global South, where local digital economies are nascent, TikTok is filling the gap. In Indonesia and Nigeria, it is offering entertainment, entrepreneurial possibilities, and voice to hitherto marginalized voices.

On the other hand, the West has robust digital ecosystems such as YouTube and Instagram, which compete with TikTok, and governments view it as a security threat. The United States and the European Union have made complaints regarding data harvesting and algorithmic manipulation, leading to restrictions, such as government device bans.

Such a dichotomy underscores the falsehood of the "death of distance" philosophy: far from dissolving borders, digital technologies have the propensity to entrench geopolitical and economic fault lines. Secondly, TikTok's success in the Global South is more a result of the absence of strong local competitors than strategic platform loyalty. The platform's success in the Global South underscores the paradoxes of digital globalization, where technology access fails to yield fruit in the same proportion. The Rise of AI Superpowers and Techno-Nationalism

The Sino-American AI Duopoly Artificial Intelligence is controlled by two superpowers, the United States, with tech giants Google, Apple, and Meta, and China, with Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent. This duopoly is a result of a mix of factors that include economies of scale and network effects, with more users creating more data, which boosts AI algorithms in return.

And, of course, there is government policy; China's "Great Firewall" and American subsidies for tech companies define national digital ecologies. Corporate hegemony also makes things difficult, with GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft) and BATX (Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, Xiaomi) dominating global digital infrastructure.

The majority of nations do not have the means to compete on a competitive level, pushing them into dependency. According to Verdi, countries need to align with either the U.S. or China in a bid to have access to AI advanced technologies—a linkage that goes beyond economics to geopolitics. This fact creates a new kind of digital alignment in which nations of the Global South are pushed to "choose a side" not due to independence or choice but out of survival imperatives in a nascent digital economy. The repercussions of this alignment are deep, with countries trying to come to terms with technological dependence and global geopolitical order.

TikTok Bans as Techno-Nationalism Western TikTok bans exemplify the theory of techno-nationalism with the focus on national control over digital sovereignty. The United States is a prime example where the Trump administration called for a ban in 2020 fearing that ByteDance could share U.S. users' data with the Chinese

government. Although the ban was foiled in courts, the Biden administration continues to review TikTok under the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS).

Within the European Union, the European Parliament prohibited TikTok on employees' company devices in 2023 due to cybersecurity. India's prohibition of TikTok in 2020, after a border clash with China, also illustrates this pattern, as the nation referenced data privacy and national security in its justification.

These actions reflect the broader pattern of countries grasping for digital platforms as tools of national power. As the United States seeks to harness the power of Silicon Valley, China employs TikTok as a soft power tool, forging a "splinternet" wherein technology ecosystems fragment along the lines of geopolitical cleavage. This techno-nationalism also lays bare the strategic deployment of cybersecurity discourses to project digital power and constrain rivals.

These bans have implications that reach beyond direct security issues because they structure the global cyber space and affect the creation of local alternatives. Digital Colonialism: TikTok's Spread in the Global South

What is Digital Colonialism?

Digital colonialism, or techno-colonialism, is the exertion of control through the centralized management of technology, typically through mechanisms such as economic dependency, data extraction, and cultural influence. Emerging nations are reliant on foreign platforms due to a scarcity of viable local alternatives, and this creates a dynamic in which user data is siphoned to corporations and governments of tech-superpower nations. TikTok and similar platforms shape local media diets and norms, which further consolidates their influence. TikTok's expansion in the Global South fits into this framework. The app's popularity across Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America is a testament to its success at offering low-input, high-return access to digital capacity. Such access does not come free, however—it is paid for in terms of limited representation in governance frameworks, lack of control over algorithmic visibility, and minimal stake in monetization models.

The site's popularity in these countries underscores the dynamics of digital colonialism, wherein the promise of connection is ever compromised by the dynamics of dependency.

Case Study 1: Africa's Digital Dependency

Africa's digital economy is dominated by foreigners, with giants like Google and Facebook leading digital advertising, which in South Africa alone represents 82% of the market. Huawei also dominates much of Africa's 5G infrastructure, which has stoked surveillance and data protection concerns. TikTok's success in the midst of all this is telling; with little local competition, it has emerged as a main source of entertainment and commerce. In Kenya, for example, "TikTok shops" allow informal

traders to access consumers, but the revenue obtained goes mostly to ByteDance, rather than local creators.

Furthermore, African TikTok users are algorithmically shadowbanned and have their visibility reduced for content that addresses social justice or political issues. This recalls historical colonial trade patterns where raw data, similar to raw materials, are mined, processed externally, and profited from by external entities. In the same way that colonialists once controlled physical infrastructure like railways and seaports, technological giants now possess the digital infrastructure of communication, commerce, and cultural exchange, recreating the cycle of dependency.

**Case Study 2: India's Ban and the Aftermath** When India banned TikTok in 2020, it had already derailed the livelihoods of millions of creators who employed the app to earn a living and express themselves. Even though Indian apps like Moj and Chingari were developed after the ban, none of them have managed to match TikTok's scale and audience participation. This is one example which indicates how susceptible countries are to geopolitical uncertainties because India's digital economy was deeply embedded with Chinese technology.

The challenge of attaining digital sovereignty reveals itself since establishing competitive local platforms necessitates enormous investment, which most countries in the Global South lack.

The Indian case also shows that techno-nationalist approaches can fail if not complemented by sustainable local substitutes. The vacuum created by the absence of TikTok was left unoccupied by Indian platforms adequately, showcasing the deep reliance on foreign platforms for digital content and revenue. The fate of the Indian creators demonstrates how difficult it is to compete with a digital world driven by geopolitical rivalries and the imperative for local solutions. "Carrot and Stick" Digital Diplomacy

Verdi observes that AI powers use "carrot and stick" strategies to assert control in virtual worlds. The "carrot" is usually in the form of tech investments, for example, China's Digital Silk Road initiative that seeks to increase its influence by developing infrastructure in host nations.

On the other hand, the "stick" entails denying access to technology or resources if countries are opposed to aligning with a specific superpower, such as the denial of 5G deals with countries that have been opposed to Huawei.

TikTok is a key part of this strategy. Countries that adopt the platform reap economic benefits and access to a worldwide audience but expose themselves to the risk of reliance on an external actor for their online existence. Countries that do not comply can find themselves with reduced access to technology and investment, presenting a binary option of compliance or exclusion. This is reminiscent of earlier colonialist relationships, where political allegiance was directly linked to access to resources and economic viability. Conclusion: Techno-Colonialism or a "New Dark Age"?

The TikTok conundrum—prohibited in the West, thriving in the South—exposes the fault lines of online globalization. The internet, far from opening access, has turned into an instrument of one-way power relations. Techno-nationalism in the West wants to safeguard sovereignty but could lead to fragmentation of cyberspace, and digital colonialism in the South promotes dependence, with information and cultural influence flowing outward. As Verdi cautions, developing countries are presented with a "vicious dilemma": they can embrace techno-colonialism and use foreign platforms and cede data and control or abstain from using such platforms and fall into a "digital dark age" with minimal access to technology. Towards a More Equal Digital Future Answers to these kinds of problems remain controversial but may involve the creation of indigenous platforms, like India's Atmanirbhar Bharat program, that try to create tech self-reliance. Global data governance standards, like the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), may act as templates for safeguarding user data and holding tech giants accountable. South-South digital cooperation, like projects within the African Union, may also advance regional coordination and innovation. Capacity building and training in digital literacy are also necessary in order to equip developers and users with the nuances of the digital environment. Investment in infrastructure is necessary so that local platforms can achieve scale and competitiveness in the global marketplace. Short of systemic transformation, the internet's promise of equality will remain unfulfilled, and TikTok's story will be one part of a longer volume of cyber conquest. An alternative digital future must put sovereignty, inclusiveness, and equity first—derived not from control of the globe, but from mutual empowerment. The answer lies in all of us coming together to overcome the disparities that exist in the virtual world so that all countries can tap into and enjoy the benefits of the digital economy.

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