

The American way: Give TikTok a bad name and kill it

Wan Lixin

The widely publicized hearing titled “How Congress can Safeguard American Data Privacy and Protect Children from Online Harms,” which aimed to eventually ban TikTok in the United States, was thought-provoking.

Although any attempt to ban TikTok would take time, the hearing did highlight the ignorance and arrogance of some US lawmakers.

Their blusterings were hugely theatrical, full of sound and fury, but they meant nothing but bigotry and ignorance.

On the surface, the hearing appears to be intended to improve understanding of the situation through informed exchanges. In reality, some lawmakers are more eager to discredit and destroy the company.

So whenever CEO Shou Zi Chew attempted to deliberate

on TikTok’s business practices, he was rudely interrupted; whenever he attempted to comment on issues that some lawmakers appeared to be interested in, he was either prevented from doing so or ignored.

Given the circumstances, it’s not surprising that his attempts to explain failed to persuade the lawmakers.

There is a full spectrum of accusations.

TikTok has been accused of promoting content that promotes eating disorders in children, illegal drug sales, and sexual exploitation, but lawmakers have refused to explain why these issues are less prevalent outside of the United States.

Many of the lawmakers, it appears, lacked the technical expertise to meaningfully debate issues ranging from algorithms to source code.

Debating national security risks can be difficult: if the

United States can ban TikTok due to bogus national security concerns, does that mean that the rest of the world should follow suit by banning Windows, Android, and a variety of other apps?

As China’s Foreign Ministry has stated, data security should not be used to generalize the concept of national security in order to contain other countries with baseless accusations. It is critical that all countries follow market economics and fair competition rules by creating a business-friendly environment based on openness, transparency, and freedom from discrimination.

Furthermore, TikTok has been proactive in assuaging security concerns with Project Texas, in which the data of American users is stored on domestic servers run by the Texas-based Oracle.

The Economist recently stated that the most frequently cited privacy risk was “probably

exaggerated,” because most such information “could be scraped from TikTok’s front end or bought online — especially for Americans, who are poorly protected by data-privacy laws.”

“If you think the US needs a TikTok ban rather than a comprehensive privacy law regulating data brokers, you don’t care about privacy; you just hate that a Chinese company has built a dominant social media platform,” Chew said at the hearing.

TikTok’s only real indictment is its success.

As The Economist commented recently, “the app has brought a warm glow to its 1 billion plus users, as well as an icy dash of competition to the social-media incumbents of Silicon Valley. With its rise, a part of the tech industry that had seemed closed to competition has been cracked wide open.”

Killing the company would

not be as simple as it seems.

Donald Trump attempted and failed to force TikTok’s parent company, ByteDance, to give up its American operations near the end of his presidency. With TikTok having grown twice as large as it did during Trump’s tenure and given its growing popularity among Americans, lawmakers would likely need to be more creative in their arrangements.

Many Americans would agree that TikTok has created a forum for free speech for 150 million Americans as well as provided 5 million American entrepreneurs with new channels to market their products and services and improve their livelihoods.

The anguish of American users and small business owners would contrast sharply with the ecstasy of Silicon Valley, where home-grown social-media companies would see the ban of their popular rival as a blessing in disguise.



June 2021

Biden signed an executive order, revoking President Trump’s orders aimed at banning TikTok.

September 2021

TikTok announced it has 1 billion monthly active global users, on par with Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp.

July 2022

TikTok has established a US data security division known as “USDS” to protect US user data and implement Project Texas, a plan in which US user data is stored on domestic servers run by Oracle.

December 2022

US President Joe Biden approved banning TikTok from government devices.

March 2023

Denmark’s Defense Ministry has announced a ban on its staff from having the app TikTok on their work phones.

The UK has said government ministers and civil servants will not be able to use TikTok on their phones with France saying it will ban “recreational” use of TikTok and other apps like Twitter on government staff phones.

TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew gave a testimony before the US Congress last Thursday, having revealed earlier that the app had 150 million monthly active users in the United States.

August 2020

TikTok revealed detailed user numbers for the first time. It has had about 100 million monthly active US users, up nearly 800 percent from January 2018.

Then US President Donald Trump issued two executive orders, barring ByteDance from doing business with any US firms and giving TikTok 90 days to either spin off its business in the US or sell it to a US company.

June 2022

TikTok said it has completed transferring US user data to servers at Oracle.

December 2021

Cloudflare data showed TikTok has surpassed Google to become the most popular website in 2021.

February 2023

Canada announced it would ban TikTok from all government-issued devices.

The European Commission, the European Parliament, and the EU Council have announced plans to ban TikTok from staff phones.

January 2023

Apptopia data showed TikTok was the most downloaded app in 2022, garnering 672 million new installs around the world.