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China's Digital Service Industry Infiltration: Threats and Countermeasures

中國數位服務產業滲透之威脅與反制

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The impact of the infiltration in the United States by iconic Chinese digital service providers such as TikTok and WeChat surfaced in the wake of US President Donald Trump's ban. On August 5, 2020, the Trump administration announced the "Clean Network" program, listing TikTok and WeChat as major threats. On August 6, Trump issued an executive order prohibiting the public from using TikTok. The move set off a wave of backlash in American society, leading to petitions against the order from influencers with up to 100 million followers. Forbes magazine directly warned that the order would likely result in a big loss of votes from young people, thus added a blow to the coming November presidential election.¹

TikTok's influence on American consumers has gone deep and wide, and spread from the socio-economic front to the political front. Among the Chinese enterprises blocked by the Trump administration, TikTok is uniquely positioned. It is a success story of the CCP's efforts in making inroads for its digital service industry in global markets while posing security risks of data theft, similar to other Chinese enterprises. However, unlike Huawei, TikTok has created a direct and close connection with the American society and a strong dependency among the public. TikTok is also different from WeChat in that it is a pop culture platform for young people who attach important generational significance to it.

The strategic narrative under the disguise of free economy

Being one of its kind, TikTok unexpectedly rose to prominence in the international market. Looking at the development trajectory of TikTok, one can see CCP has been deliberately supporting TikTok expanding overseas and use it to channel their strategic narrative in order to influence Western societies. ByteDance, TikTok's parent company, has been systemically supported by CCP. In addition to having the required party committee and branch set up within the organization, CEO Zhang Yiming is a key talent of CCP's United Front ideology education. This umbilical cord, or "red" CCP tie, gives Douyin [抖音] (TikTok's original Chinese version parent until the international operations was branded TikTok) unique advantages in China,

¹ 美國「乾淨網路」計畫，參見“U.S. Steps Up Campaign to Purge ‘Untrusted’ Chinese Apps,” *NYT*, August 5, 2020, <https://reurl.cc/d5zzZz>; 川普發布行政命令，參見“Trump issues orders banning TikTok and WeChat from operating in 45 days if they are not sold by Chinese parent companies,” *CNN*, August 7, 2020, <https://reurl.cc/vDyEnL>; 網紅連署反對禁令，參見 Max Beaumont, “Dear President Trump: An Open Letter From The TikTok Creator Community,” *Medium*, August 3, 2020, <https://reurl.cc/20xabn>; 《富比世》雜誌報導，參見“Banning TikTok Could Have Devastating Electoral Consequences For Trump,” *Forbes*, July 9, 2020, <https://reurl.cc/rx01x>。



allowing it to expand its reach overseas after a domestic pilot run.²

In order to successfully make inroads into international markets, the CCP has packaged Douyin [抖音] /TikTok into a product that conforms to the logic of the Western free market. It wasn't until 2017 that Douyin [抖音] divided its operation into a domestic version and TikTok, the international one. In order to conceal the Chinese birthmark of TikTok, TikTok made a point in demonstrating its respect to the principle of free economy, such as hiring professional management and employees from the United States. In the face of US imposed sanctions, TikTok's top management has made great efforts in drawing a line between TikTok and the CCP, and even threatened to sue the Trump administration, claiming the ban violates the US Constitution. The Chinese authority supported TikTok's claims by outright condemning Washington for bullying and violating the principle of fair competition. Hu Xijin, editor-in-chief of the CCP official media outlet Global Times, called on Chinese netizens to accept TikTok's decision to move its headquarters out of China with grace, a deliberated move to showcase TikTok's free and open international brand image.³

New type of gray zone threat

This strategic narrative by the CPP was unable to hide the fact that TikTok indeed poses threats. TikTok has always had security issues such as personal data theft and content censorship. The context in the background of these controversial threats is that TikTok may also become a tool for "gray zone conflict". TikTok appears to be simply a algorithm-driven, video-sharing social media platform. However, due to the following features, TikTok is likely to be used to spread specific content in emergency times and become a powerful internet threat. The new type of gray zone threat posed by TikTok include:

1. Marking sensitive information. The app marks the IP address and digital content of individual users; and after analyzing data like filtering specific personnel's behavior, location and digital content, it marks the stationing of sensitive personnel, field operation and camp or images of sensitive equipments. This is the main reason why the US military banned TikTok. For example, The Wall Street Journal exposed that TikTok bypassed privacy protection measures and collected unique identifiers called MAC addresses without users' knowledge for as long as 15 months.⁴
2. Inciting social emotions. The line between entertainment and political content on TikTok has gradually become blurred. In addition to existing light-hearted videos, there is also advocacy of serious issues. Aided by audio and video features on TikTok, the impact of these posts should not be underestimated. For example, during the "Black Lives Matter" movement which spread across the United States, TikTok presented

² 戰略敘事概念，參見“The Strategic Narrative: A Better Way To Communicate Change,” *Forbes*, May 4, 2015, <https://reurl.cc/e8v86j>；中共計畫性扶持，參見〈中國社會科學院新媒體研究中心在京成立〉，《人民網》，2015年11月25日，<https://reurl.cc/zzgqrQ>；中共網路統戰培訓，參見〈中央統戰部首度輪訓新媒體從業人員，陳彤張一鳴鄧飛等在列〉，《澎湃新聞》，2015年5月19日，<https://reurl.cc/odzd75>。

³ 字節跳動公司揚言對川普政府提告，參見“TikTok to sue Trump administration as soon as Tuesday, US media report says,” *SCMP*, August 9, 2020, <https://reurl.cc/GrZ2DG>；中國外交部回應，參見〈2020年8月4日外交部發言人汪文斌主持例行記者會〉，中華人民共和國外交部，2020年8月3日，<https://reurl.cc/Qd12N2>；《環球時報》總編輯言論，參見〈面對美國封殺 抖音選擇撤出中國 環時總編呼籲包容〉，《經濟日報》，2020年8月4日，<https://reurl.cc/vDyE8e>。

⁴ TikTok 追蹤用戶行為，參見“TikTok Tracked User Data Using Tactic Banned by Google,” *WSJ*, August 11, 2020, <https://reurl.cc/gmkqyL>。



emotional or public anger-inciting videos of police violence or protests clips to users who were interested in viewing and actually participating in the demonstration. TikTok was seen to be a key platform of emotional mobilization during this movement.⁵

3. Connecting and mobilizing users. TikTok uses hashtags to mark videos to connect and mobilize communities, creating a trend of TikTok challenges. Such collective actions easily become popular among young communities and set trends. It is worth noting that when the "Black Lives Matter" movement started, malicious activities appeared on TikTok inciting hate speech, such as "#georgefloydchallenge", a collective imitation of the victim Floyd's death. TikTok then easily can become the fuse that triggers malicious actions.
4. Unpredictability. TikTok boasts of the principle of "content first." Unlike other social media, like Facebook which still use social status as the structure for user expression and feedback, in the world of TikTok, identities are irrelevant. As long as the creative content is eye-catching and the story is good enough, algorithms can easily produce "overnight popularity." When the source and patterns are beyond control, TikTok's popular content is full of uncertainty and things are likely to get out of control, posing a potential security risk.

Strategic countermeasures

In the face of the CCP's TikTok strategic narrative of "countering free economy with a free economy", we should be careful not to fall prey to the party's manipulative logic of "equating economic freedom to political freedom". With its a enormous user base, TikTok is very likely to be used as a combat platform for the CCP to launch public opinion wars, psychological warfare, and even cognitive warfare, becoming a new type of gray zone threat. In response to such narrative by the CCP, though under the prerequisite of guaranteeing freedom of speech, the government should adopt strategic countermeasures appealing to young people's social media usage habits, enhance social communication of policies, and establish comprehensive discourses to strengthen citizens' awareness.

⁵ TikTok 煽動社會情緒說法，參見“TikTok has its Arab Spring moment as teen activism overtakes dance moves,” *Reuters*, June 3, <https://reurl.cc/pynrZe>。