

Laidlaw Foundation Scholarship Programme

Belle Ling Tuen Li - Research Proposal

Project Title: TikTok – Social Media Surveillance: Whether the banning of TikTok is justified and its wider political impact on students

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Research Period: 3rd July 2023 – 6th August 2023 & 28th August 2023 – 3rd September 2023

Research Location: Durham University Campus & Working from Home

Motivation behind the Research Project

Growing up in Hong Kong, I remain sensitive to activities regulated by the Chinese Government that might potentially infringe on one's freedom or provoke an international quarrel. As a Philosophy, Politics and Economics student, I aim to delve into the political, social and economic aspects of the influence of social media surveillance by the Chinese Government on a global level.

When the topic of social media surveillance on TikTok by the Chinese Government is being discussed, most scholarly approaches will focus on its potential national security threat on a national level. There is an observable disproportionate concentration on the larger matters. However, it barely touches on the smaller yet equally important stakeholders, the teenage TikTok users and students. By interviewing those stakeholders and utilising their opinions in my research, I am endeavour to understand and give voice to those who are often neglected.

Background

TikTok (also known as 'Douyin') is a Chinese social media app founded in 2016 and its market has expanded globally during the pandemic. It has become the number one social media in the USA in 2022 and the demographic is dominated by people under the age of 24.

However, when Donald Trump was the president of the USA, numerous pernicious comments on TikTok have been made by the government, claiming that the Chinese Communist Party could access the personal data of TikTok users, and this surveillance creates a threat to digital security in the USA. Recently, President Biden has banned TikTok on federal government-issued devices due to the same concern in which Senator Josh Hawley of Missouri called TikTok to be a 'trojan horse for the Chinese Community Party'. Recently, Montana became the first US state to ban TikTok on mobile application stores due to its concern over TikTok's ties to China. Even the FBI has deemed TikTok to be forging national security concerns. The hostility towards this app is not unprecedented as countries such as India have also banned the usage of TikTok after the fatal border conflict with China in 2020.

Research Objectives and Methodologies

My research would follow the six main questions to understand the nature of social media surveillance and the potential threat of TikTok:

1. Is it necessary to have some form of surveillance on social media to protect citizens' welfare?
2. How much data could the Chinese government obtain from social media surveillance?
3. To what extent does Chinese social media such as TikTok propose a national security threat to other countries?
4. How does the app TikTok affect the political and psychological aspects of students?
5. Do Chinese citizens or other worldwide users really care about being monitored despite TikTok's potential social media surveillance and the consequential personal privacy leakages?
6. Is the banning of TikTok in other countries really justified?

By doing so, I would carry out the following tasks:

- Evaluate whether social media surveillance is necessary to preserve national security
- Collect data on the firm, TikTok's relationship with the Chinese Communist Party
- Interview the TikTok company for its response to the allegations on its app
- Investigate the Facebook Lawsuit as an example of social media surveillance
- Examine the Indian and Trump government's motives for the ban on TikTok
- Critically analyse different scholar's thoughts on the issue
- Explore the differing Chinese and Western news articles' opinions of TikTok

- Interview 40 domestic and international students on their view of TikTok
- Consult groups such as the EFF and the ICO for their judgement on TikTok

Summary

There is always a dilemma between freedom and security. This research would begin by exploring whether the trade-off between the two variables is necessary. It is important to understand that both TikTok and Facebook are private companies, however, the Chinese Government could potentially leverage those personal data in TikTok. Responses to these accusations by the TikTok Company would be provided. The Chinese government's motives for this social media surveillance would be discussed. This research would then attempt to explain and analyse the influence of social media surveillance using different International Relations theories such as realism and constructivism. For example, by investigating if the claim of national security threat from TikTok is only what states make of it. While the Chinese government might have infringed on one's freedom through surveillance, we have to assess if other countries are surveilling their citizens through social media such as Facebook or Twitter as well. The research will then delve into TikTok's political and psychological influence on the smaller yet equally important stakeholders, the teenage users and the students. However, if we have proven TikTok and other apps to be collecting personal data, would the users be bothered to boycott the app? If TikTok users would not mind having their data leaked, is the banning of TikTok by the US and Indian governments then violating their citizen's freedom to access their preferred social media platform? The EFF would agree with this view. Different scholars' opinions would be drawn upon to answer the question of which approach is the most appropriate to protect the freedom and liberty of citizens. Most importantly, this research would look at how students with different ethical backgrounds think of the banning of TikTok.