

## **TikTok's Relationship with China's CCP: An inquiry with CEO Mr. Shou**

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The spread of conflict and division among nations is a result of the misuse of digital technologies. It can upset political institutions and threaten democracy, according to research. A paper published in March 2022 in the European Journal of Futures Research discussed the effects of artificial intelligence, bots, trolls, and false information, which are causing more intolerance and divisiveness, especially when politicians with dubious democratic beliefs take office.<sup>1</sup> A such kind of vulnerable and easy to misuse technology, a social media network TikTok has become one of the platforms among the most well-liked apps in recent years, especially among younger generations. Concerns have been expressed concerning the app's capacity to influence users and its effects on national security due to its affiliation with the Communist Party of China (CCP). This article aims to examine TikTok's connection with the CCP with a particular emphasis on the Mr. Shou's (who is the CEO of the app) testimony before Congress in 2023. In order to assess the impartiality of the congressional investigation, the article also draws comparison of this hearing with the prior Facebook hearing held in the Congress.

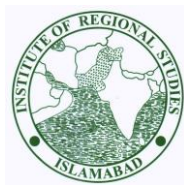
### **Congress vs TikTok CEO Mr. Shou**

On 23 March 2023 TikTok's CEO Mr Shou Chew was held accountable in the US congressional hearing. Mr. Shou Chew, the Chief Executive of TikTok, was compelled to defend his company's relationship with China as well as the safeguards for its youngest users during a tense congressional hearing, which coincided with a bipartisan effort to outright ban the app in the US due to national security concerns. Allegations that TikTok was gathering and sharing user data with the Chinese government were the main topics of discussion during the session.<sup>2</sup>

The Congress stressed on TikTok's relations with China's CCP and its parent company ByteDance which is a Chinese company wherein the Congress contended that ByteDance was a state-controlled company and provided information to the Chinese government. While Mr. Shou repeatedly rejected the claims and stated that ByteDance was not a Chinese agent per se. Nevertheless, lawmakers were unconvinced, with many raising concerns about the possibility of Chinese meddling in the US politics and the app's effects on national security. They cited earlier instances of Chinese influence tactics on social media, like

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those connected to the protests in Hong Kong and the COVID-19 outbreak.

Mr. Shou acknowledged the issues that were brought up with TikTok's data handling. He said that the business took these worries seriously and was dedicated to resolving them. He stressed that TikTok had a staff that was solely responsible for data privacy and security, and that the business frequently conducted audits and evaluations to make sure that its policies and processes were successful. Shou attempted to reassure legislators that TikTok was open about its data methods and did not share user data with the Chinese government by emphasising the company's dedication to customer privacy and security in his testimony.

## **Congress Vs Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg**

In 2018, Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg similarly faced a two-day hearing before Congress in response to the Cambridge Analytica Scandal, in which a political consulting firm accessed the personal data of millions of Facebook users without their consent. In the course of the session, Members of the Parliament held Zuckerberg accountable on a variety of topics, including Facebook's data protection practices, its involvement in the 2016 US presidential election, and its alleged monopoly position in the tech sector.<sup>3</sup> The hearing was widely viewed as a watershed moment for the tech industry, with many observers noting that it represented a turning point in the relationship between Silicon Valley and Washington. Zuckerberg was grilled by lawmakers from both sides of the aisle, with many expressing frustration and anger over Facebook's handling of the Cambridge

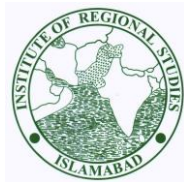
Analytica scandal and its broader impact on privacy and democracy.

## **Comparing the TikTok and Facebook Hearings**

The congressional hearings for both, the Facebook and TikTok share a number of similarities. Concerns over user privacy, data collection, and potential political influence have drawn attention to both businesses. Both hearings also concentrated on how social media sites shape public discourses and how they affect democracy.

There are some significant differences as well, however. TikTok is owned by a Chinese firm, ByteDance, as opposed to Facebook, which is an American business. Concerns have been expressed regarding the possibility of Chinese influence on the app's content and user information as a result. Furthermore, while Facebook has come under fire for how it handles political advertising and the spread of false information, TikTok's connection to the CCP raises questions.<sup>4</sup>

The time of the hearings was one of the primary differences. The hearings on Facebook took place during a period when social media and privacy issues were receiving a lot of media attention. The hearing for TikTok however, took place at a time when examining digital businesses had become routine, with numerous earlier hearings setting the standard for how these companies should behave and what is expected of them. Given that Congress is more accustomed to dealing with internet corporations and their privacy concerns, this difference in time may have had an impact on how the hearings were conducted.



The level of scrutiny each CEO was subjected to was possibly the most important. While lawmakers questioned Zuckerberg on a variety of topics, Chew's hearing was more specifically focused on TikTok's ties to the CCP. Due to some MPs' apparent preference for gaining political advantage over learning the truth, this may have contributed to the impression that the hearing was biased against TikTok.

Overall, there were similarities between the Facebook and TikTok hearings in that they both sought to make internet giants responsible for their deeds and safeguard user privacy. In contrast to the Facebook hearing, the TikTok hearing, however, was distinct because it was specifically focused on the company's connection with the CCP.

## US scepticism and Chinese tech

US has always been sceptical of Chinese technology and the main concern behind banning the app is the authoritarian government of China and its control over the national media and social media networks. As in the past TikTok has come under fire for Xinjiang detention centres and the Hong Kong protests-related content it has censored, which implies a readiness to submit to Chinese government censorship demands which congress was referring to in the hearing.<sup>5</sup>

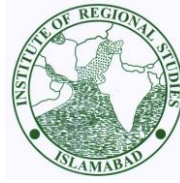
In May 2019, the US government under Trump administration had similar concerns as they have over TikTok as a threat to US national security and banned the Chinese tech giant Huawei on the basis of allegation that Huawei was gathering the data for Chinese government as it was deeply connected in to CCP in the background. As in the past the chairman of

Huawei was an engineer in the Chinese military and which create a possibility of the company relation with the CCP. Also, private Corporations in China are bound to provide data to the state according to the new Chinese data law, which is a risky factor for firms to working with China and a concern for the other countries national security policy makers.<sup>6</sup>

Following the same steps of banning Huawei on August 6, 2020, Trump signed an executive order giving TikTok 45 days to sell its American business to a US-based firm or face a ban in the country.<sup>7</sup> A federal court eventually overturned the prohibition. The ban was ultimately not overturned and remains a possibility in the future. "TikTok automatically acquires enormous swathes of information from its users, including internet and other network activity information, such as location data and browsing and search history," according to the decision filed on August 6, 2020. The Chinese Communist Party may have access to the private and confidential information of Americans as a result of this data collecting. This paves a way to why US feels threaten from the TikTok.

## Conclusion

In conclusion of TikTok and US concerns, since its rapid surge in popularity began in 2018, TikTok has faced legislative challenges same as Huawei and is on the brink of a ban. As reported by the Pew Research Centre, a majority of teenagers in the US claim that they use TikTok nowadays. Among all 67 per cent between the ages of 13 and 17 say they have used the app, while 16 per cent of those in that age range say they use it "quite regularly".<sup>8</sup> However, almost every social media network



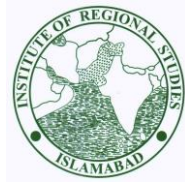
across the board works on the same principles like that of TikTok to set an addictive algorithm, gather user's data for personalization of the experience on the platform based on their behaviour and interaction with content available on the platform to engage them for hours on which the social media owners capitalize by advertising the content.<sup>9</sup> Such a huge population on social media network such as TikTok can create loopholes and be a threat to national and individual security and its data privacy practices and relationship with the CCP have raised significant concerns.

It's debatable if Chew was treated unfairly or biasedly at the hearing, but it's obvious that worries regarding TikTok's ties to

the CCP are not going away any time soon. Thus, it will be crucial for the creators of the app to be transparent about how user data is gathered and utilised, as well as to address worries regarding its relationship with the CCP, as politicians and authorities continue to scrutinise TikTok's business practices. Even though some of the social media networks have not banned porn and is openly available to public which is more dangerous than the addictive algorithm of TikTok and its deadly video challenges. In the end, TikTok's success will rest on its capacity to allay these worries and show that it is dedicated to user security and privacy.

## Notes and References

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