

Is TikTok a Security Threat?



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TikTok received plenty of attention in the news over the last few months. Concerns over TikTok's current parent company, ByteDance, came under intense scrutiny based on their relationship with the Chinese government. Several large companies in the United States banned TikTok from company owned devices and the U.S. government threatened to ban the app from downloads in the U.S. unless a sale is made to a U.S. parent company.



The concern of companies and the U.S. government is an alleged strategic partnership in place between ByteDance and the Communist Party of China on data sharing. User data for TikTok is housed in China and TikTok could possibly be used to snoop information on U.S. citizens. Most of the data collected is mundane but Artificial Intelligence and Data Scientists could make use of this information if properly analyzed. A detailed analysis of TikTok shows the app does not collect any more data than other social media apps. Privacy concerns should not just fall on TikTok as most social media apps are over-permissioned.

China has a history of being responsible for some of the largest data breaches in the United States. Breaches on Equifax (a U.S. based credit bureau), several insurance companies, and the U.S. Office of Personnel Management have all been attributed to work of Chinese Intelligence. One of the concerns of the U.S. government is the Chinese government no longer has to attempt a breach on a U.S. company; TikTok users are providing useful information to the Chinese government.

How is TikTok Different from Other Social Media Sites?

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so on, all collect personal information similar to TikTok. The primary use of this information is for advertising, grabbing user information to target profiles with ads the companies know will make them the most money. The major difference is where the data is going. Other social media companies use this information for financial gain, TikTok sends the data back to China. TikTok is the first Chinese social media app to gain a large foothold worldwide and there is potential for data use to be used in a malicious manner.



Should You Keep TikTok?

If you have TikTok, or any social media account, you should be aware of where your personal information is going. Assume a worse case scenario; your data is not secure and the app may help malicious actors with social engineering or identity theft. It is not a "black and white" answer every user has a decision to make on what companies know about them and how their data will be used for the companies gain.