

US' WeChat ban is justified

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Friday, 21 August 2020 04:14

As part of his administration's Clean Network strategy, US President Donald Trump on Aug. 6 issued two executive orders that restrict "transactions" with China-based ByteDance, the parent company of video-sharing app TikTok, and Tencent Holdings, the parent company of Chinese communications behemoth WeChat.

While the removal of TikTok will be irritating for its American users, the WeChat order is the more contentious, due to the app's ubiquity in the Chinese market.

WeChat has evolved over the years from a simple messaging app into a "Swiss Army knife" super app.

In today's largely cashless society, most Chinese use WeChat to pay for meals, buy train tickets, pay bills and even book doctor's appointments. In China, phones that cannot run WeChat probably would not sell well.

Analyst Kuo Ming-chi (郭明錫) has predicted that global shipments of Apple iPhones could plummet by 25 to 30 percent if the company were forced to remove WeChat from its App Store.

Some have argued that if "transactions" means that people in the US would be prevented from using the apps, it would constitute an attack on free speech and violate the US constitution.

Others have said the US cannot defeat China's digital firewall by erecting one of its own.

Despite the criticism, the Trump administration is right to seek to block WeChat, particularly in markets outside of China.

First, there is the issue of reciprocity. US tech giants, including Facebook, Twitter, Google and YouTube, were forced out of China more than a decade ago. Since Beijing has closed its

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market to fair competition by foreign tech firms, why should Washington continue to allow their Chinese equivalents unfettered access to the US market?

Second, WeChat is a security nightmare. The app hoovers up reams of personal information, creating detailed profiles of its users. Mandated by Chinese law to grant domestic security agencies access to data on its servers, WeChat operates as a proxy digital listening post for China's police state.

Unsurprisingly, Beijing uses WeChat to spy on its own people, including persecuted minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet. Less well known is that WeChat accounts registered outside of China are subject to the same level of surveillance.

A May 7 report by the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab found that documents and images transmitted among non-China-registered accounts undergo content surveillance and the data are analyzed for content that is politically sensitive in China.

The report also found that user content created and sent outside of China is used to train and extend the app's China-based censorship system.

Separate investigations by cyberresearchers have shown that even outside of China, WeChat automatically blocks or removes messages, posts, photographs — even profile pictures — that Beijing deems to be politically sensitive.

WeChat is being used to extend China's "Great Firewall" to the rest of the world. Those who warn that the app's removal from the US market would represent an assault on free speech need to realize that the app itself is an affront to free speech.

WeChat is available for download from the Taiwan versions of Apple's App Store and Google Play. China is in an undeclared "dirty war" with Taiwan, the US and other democratic nations, and WeChat is a key weapon in it.

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To counter China's weaponization of open and liberal societies, its democratic opponents need to accept a degree of restriction to their free markets. Government policy should not be influenced by huge corporations that have put too many eggs in the China basket.

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