

## Taiwan must address TikTok threat

Written by Pan Kuan 潘寬

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In the article “Who’s afraid of TikTok? The world’s most exciting app is also its most mistrusted,” published on July 7, The Economist warned that the Chinese ownership of TikTok — a popular short-form video-sharing social media platform that has swept the world and is taking over the market shares of other social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram — is a serious concern.

Headquartered in China, whose government is addicted to surveillance and propaganda, the bigger problem with TikTok is the opportunity it provides the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to access users’ private information and manipulate what the app’s vast foreign audience sees.

India banned TikTok for allegedly stealing Indian users’ information and surreptitiously sending it to China.

With many countries on alert, is Taiwan, which is on the front line of China’s hegemonic expansion, prepared for technology like TikTok?

The Economist article said that TikTok is quickly catching up to its peers, and is growing much faster than other platforms. Last year, it reached the milestone of 1 billion users, which it achieved in four years, compared with the eight years it took Facebook, YouTube and Instagram to reach that level.

The short-video format has caught the attention of young people, with about 44 percent of TikTok users in the US younger than 25, while only 16 percent of Facebook users are younger than 25.

That TikTok was founded in China and under the jurisdiction of the CCP also poses risks. With more and more people watching videos and posting personal information on the platform, the CCP has the power to decide what content can appear and what should not appear, in addition to the possibility of obtaining user data.

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China's "united front" tactics against Taiwan are pervasive. In addition to Beijing's intimidation and saber rattling against Taipei, its influence on the Internet should also be taken seriously.

For example, Taiwanese Facebook posts are censored by the Chinese, and terms such as "Wuhan pneumonia" (武漢肺炎) or criticisms of China might be banned. This directly interferes with the freedom of speech of Taiwanese.

Furthermore, as the app's algorithm decides which videos are pushed to users, the operators of TikTok, with its technology in the hands of Chinese companies, control the content that people can see.

Under these circumstances, passing the National Communications Commission's digital intermediary services act has become even more important. In addition to taking back the right to review content on social media platforms, the act regulates the openness and transparency of online platforms. Protecting Taiwan's freedom of speech from foreign interference is one of the main aims of the bill.

*Pan Kuan was a participant in the Sunflower movement.*

Translated by Lin Lee-Kai

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