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TRAFFICKING DATA: HOW CHINA IS WINNING THE BATTLE FOR DIGITAL SOVEREIGNTY

A Conversation with Aynne Kokas, PhD,
The Miller Center & University of Virginia

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Trafficking Data: How China Is Winning the Battle for Digital Sovereignty

As digital technologies and social media increasingly govern the ways we work and socialize, the business logic that undergirds these digital platforms has become clear: we are their product. We give tech and social media companies information about everything--where we live and work, what we like to do for entertainment, what we consume, where we travel, and what we think politically. We do this willingly, but often without a full understanding of how this information is stored or used, or what happens to it when it streams into the data centers of hostile states. The flow of our data to China in recent years in particular poses grave privacy and national security questions.

There are an estimated TikTok downloads worldwide of 672 million and first time installs increasing by almost 400 percent year-over-year. In 2021 Tiktok reached three billion downloads worldwide. In addition, in January of 2022 user figures showed that there were over 30 million Android devices and 120 million iOS devices monthly active users.[1] These statistics are especially when considering the data flow of this information to foreign threats as well as the use of this platform in disinformation campaigns.

[\[1\] TikTok - Statistics & Facts](#)

Looking at disinformation threats, networks operating out of Russia used 1,704 TikTok accounts aiming posts at Europe to spread disinformation. Specifically these accounts used software to amplify Russian propaganda in local languages. These accounts were able to garner more than 133,000 followers before being removed by TikTok.[2]

The information flow into China is also concerning. In September, TikTok declined to commit to stop data flows of US user data to China, but instead committed to satisfy, “all national security concerns.” US concerns were first renewed after a BuzzFeed News report that ByteDance employees had accessed US user data on multiple occasions. TikTok officials speaking at a US Senate hearing didn’t necessarily alleviate concerns when stating that TikTok’s Chinese employees have access to US user data but denied that they wouldn’t be influenced by China. Additionally the official avoided saying whether China-based owner ByteDance would keep US user data from the Chinese government.[3]

The event will be headlined by Aynne Kokas, the C.K. Yen Professor at the Miller Center, the Director of the UVA East Asia Center, and an associate professor of media studies at the University of Virginia. Dr. Kokas will argue that both corporations and governments “traffic” much of this data without our consent--and sometimes illegally--for political and financial gain. Dr. Kokas received a Ph.D. in Asian Languages and Cultures with a focus on Chinese Media from the University of California, Los Angeles and a B.A. in Political Science and Chinese from the University of Michigan.

[\[2\] Influence Networks in Russia Misled European Users, TikTok Says](#)

[\[3\] TikTok won't commit to stopping US data flows to China](#)

Speaker

Aynne Kokas is the C.K. Yen Professor at the Miller Center and an associate professor of media studies at the University of Virginia. Kokas’ research examines Sino-U.S. media and technology relations. Kokas is a non-resident scholar at Rice University’s Baker Institute of Public Policy, a life member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and a fellow in the National Committee on United States-China Relations’ Public Intellectuals Program. She has received fellowships from the Library of Congress, National Endowment for the Humanities, Mellon Foundation, Social Science Research Council, Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, Japan’s Abe Fellowship, and other international organizations. Her writing and commentary have appeared globally in more than 50 countries and 15 languages. In the United States, her research and writing appear regularly in media outlets including CNBC, NPR’s Marketplace, The Washington Post, and Wired.



Aynne Kokas

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