

The RESTRICT Act Restricts More Than TikTok

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Supporters of expanding the federal police state have found a new boogeyman to scare the people into surrendering their liberty: TikTok. TikTok is a social media platform that allows users to upload their own videos. It is used by tens of millions of Americans and is one of the most popular websites in the world.

TikTok's popularity and the fact that it is owned by a Beijing-based company — ByteDance — has led to the spread of a claim that the site is controlled by the Chinese government. Thus the claim the Chinese government is using TikTok to collect data on US citizens.

Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman **Mark Warner** introduced last month the Restricting the Emergence of Security Threats that Risk Information and Communications Technology Act (RESTRICT Act). The bill is being marketed as a way to protect Americans from foreign governments that use social media to spy on Americans.

The RESTRICT Act makes no mention of TikTok or ByteDance. The Chinese government is mentioned only once in the bill, when it is designated as a "foreign adversary" along with five other governments. What the bill does do is give the Secretary of Commerce power to "identify, deter, disrupt, prevent, prohibit, investigate, or otherwise mitigate ... any risk arising from any covered transaction by any person, or with respect to any property" that the Secretary of Commerce determines "poses an undue or unacceptable risk" in a laundry list of areas. Among those areas are "coercive or criminal activities by a foreign adversary that are designed to undermine democratic processes and institutions or steer policy and regulatory decisions in favor of the strategic objectives of a foreign adversary to the detriment of the national security of the United States." So the US could shut down an American social media company based on the Secretary of Commerce's determination that a website, while not actually doing anything to weaken America, poses an unacceptable risk that it will?

The TikTok controversy has taken attention away from the disturbing Twitter Files, a release of communication between Twitter employees and governmental agencies. The communication shows how much government “influenced” big tech companies’ decisions regarding suppressing stories and deplatforming users. If the RESTRICT Act becomes the RESTRICT law, any site that refuses to cooperate with future efforts by the US government to suppress certain stories and individuals on social media could find itself accused of working to advance the “strategic objectives of a foreign adversary.”

Those who doubt this should consider how people who question US foreign policy are smeared as Russian agents. The RESTRICT Act’s potential victims are sites like Rumble. Rumble is a censorship-free alternative to YouTube. Rumble’s commitment to free speech is so strong that it chose to block access to its site in France instead of complying with a new French law banning Russia Today and other Russian news sources from French social media.

Like the PATRIOT Act, the RESTRICT Act plays on people’s fears to make them silent while Congress takes away more of their liberty. This bill is a blatant violation of the First Amendment that the Founders intended to protect our right to engage in political speech and share political information and opinions with others. We should stop Congress from violating our right to discuss and share ideas on TikTok and elsewhere that challenge the political class.

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